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TRIBALISM AND TOXICITY IN MATERNITY CARE

Systemic problems in maternity services are part of wider systemic problems in the NHS in England

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Wilkinson's article¹ on Kirkup's review² of recurring problems in maternity services highlights the cultural and systemic matters involved. These need to be understood in the context of similar challenges across the NHS, from acute care to mental health services.

The Health and Social Care Act 2022 is a clear statement that the fragmentation created by the Health and Social Care Act 2012 is central to many of the NHS's difficulties, although confusion around lines of authority and responsibility were built on problems caused by the introduction of primary care trusts in 2001. This is a cross-political matter and the functioning of the NHS in England has been impaired by the creation of "turbulent environments"³ by successive governments.

Wilkinson quotes Kirkup as suggesting resources are not a key factor in tackling intractable problems. The NHS workforce is its primary resource and Kirkup found workforce problems to be systemic. Improving performance and teamworking in professional groups is challenging if there are chronic staff shortages and a reliance on agency and locum staff. Kirkup's suggestions—for example, the increased use of peer review networks—are positive but not cost neutral. They rely on senior staff being released, and cover found. The absence of a workforce plan⁴ illustrates difficulty engaging with a fundamental systemic problem by the health department and NHS England.

There are resources that can support systemic understanding and improvement. Menzies's study⁵ remains vital for understanding how dysfunction in healthcare teams and services can develop. This approach has continued to evolve⁶ and remains applicable to the current NHS.⁷ West's work⁸ shows that the assumption that teams coalesce and function automatically is a fallacy and many are more likely to be functioning as "pseudo-teams." This is associated with significant risks of dysfunction. Ballatt and Campling's work on "intelligent kindness" provides a conceptual framework to support compassionate approaches.⁹

Competing interests: None declared.

Full response at: www.bmj.com/content/381/bmj.p830/rr-2.

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