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CRITICAL THINKING

Matt Morgan: Trusting in people, not processes

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My family and I recently moved from Wales to Australia. The move from our overfilled house in the UK to what feels like a hollow cove in Australia has involved a lot of trust. Trust in those we've left behind not to forget us, trust in strangers who now live in our family home, and trust in our new country of residence to treat us well.

I placed much of my trust in institutions, just as patients do when they enter a health system. For me it was the shipping industry, the aviation industry, and government agencies that I relied on to make the move. Many developments in healthcare and globalisation have resulted from a transfer of responsibility from individuals to institutions. This has served us well—standardising care with guidelines to dictate medical treatment, rather than the whims of individual doctors. But moving too far away from individuals can make patients feel as though they're treated by the drug industry, while doctors can feel as though they practise through the medical regulator and that the health system is an instrument of government.

Institutions can fail. Our shipping to Australia was delayed and overpriced. Our flights changed at the last minute. Government agencies have put endless barriers in the way of simple tasks such as buying a car. Healthcare, too, can be failed by many of the same institutions that once gave it strength. Medical regulation, especially in the UK, feels more like medical retribution, as Helen Salisbury wrote recently in *The BMJ*.¹ Governments in some places have been, quite literally, drunk on privilege, with one rule for them and many rules for others.

How should we react when the solid ground we once believed we stood on feels shaky and uncertain? During the tough times when moving to a new country I've found that, when institutions fail, individuals step up. When I couldn't buy a car through a company I found a better one for sale from a guy called Troy. I bought it without a test drive, in the dark, by placing my trust in a person I'd never met. And the car's wonderful. Friends of friends have donated perfect sofas to fill the gap until our shipping container finally arrives. Strangers have opened their doors and helped us when bloated institutions failed to treat us as people rather than processes.

Let patients, colleagues, and families remember that even in the tough times, when you feel as though you're walking through fog, most people are trustworthy and wonderful, and they care. A phone call or a direct conversation outshines an email to the complaints department by a million suns. Perhaps it's time to return the human faces to the hospitals and health centres whose front doors have been

covered in corporate logos and mission statements. A laminated organisational picture board of a smiling executive team at hospital entrances is a start, but it's not the end of this process. Let's remember that even the most respected institutions are based on many individual real humans. Trust in these individuals is what fosters trust in the whole system.

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