ACUTE PERSPECTIVE

David Oliver: The NHS needs honest, not “positive” language

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The NHS in England is in deep trouble—more so than at any time in my 33 years working in it. Clinical staff know it, senior managers and national service leaders know it, and so do patients and the public. We won’t change this by sanitising the language we use to describe what’s happening in our health service.

I find it disappointing when some of the NHS’s most senior and influential people exhort us to avoid negativity when describing system performance. Chris Hopson, NHS England’s new director of strategy, told the Health Service Journal (HSJ) in September that we should focus on positive language and avoid talking the service down.¹

Hopson is a skilled communications professional: during his time in charge of NHS Providers he used Twitter threads, articles, and interviews to describe the problems and pressures that made life very difficult for his member organisations. He lobbied the government for investment, staffing, and realistic targets. In The BMJ in 2017 he wrote that we needed “to be honest and realistic about what is deliverable at the NHS front line.”² His new role has come with a change of tone and priorities. In the recent HSJ piece he discussed the need for a “reset” of the “overwhelmingly negative narrative” about the NHS, highlighting a collective responsibility to present a more balanced picture and to emphasise improvements and successes.

NHS England’s chief executive, Amanda Pritchard, was reported by the HSJ in October to have told a closed briefing meeting of senior NHS provider and integrated care system executives that “we must not collude with defeatism” and that bosses should seek out “marginal gains” from improvement programmes.³ That said, at the very same meeting, attendees also reported her saying that the financial situation facing the NHS was a “f**king nightmare” and that ministers were no longer talking about prevention and inequalities. That same week NHS England had reported that inflation would increase costs by £7bn in the next 12 months and that pay rises for staff, amounting to £2bn, had not been funded.⁴

I still haven’t forgotten the heavy handed news management and message control operation from NHS England and the government during the peaks of the pandemic. It made senior clinicians and executives dealing with the pressures and realities reluctant to speak up, such that the central agencies could exert a tighter grip. I don’t even want to see this repeated, let alone for it to become the norm.

Nor do I welcome a cult of party-politics-style spin and positive language, debunked so brilliantly by Barbara Ehrenreich in her 2009 book Smile or Die. As the Woman’s Hour presenter Jenni Murray noted in a review, Ehrenreich described “exhortations to think positively—to see the glass as half-full even when it lies shattered on the floor.”⁵

As the Care Quality Commission has recently detailed,⁶ the distressing figures about NHS and social care access, performance, staffing, outcomes, and funding are in plain sight. They apply across primary, community, mental health, acute, and elective secondary care services. The declining experience and satisfaction of people using these services is clearly documented in the British Social Attitudes Survey.⁷ Rising health inequalities and worsening population health are a matter of record. There are no quick fixes or credible medium term policy solutions on the horizon.

I’m proud of the NHS, proud to work in it, and every bit as keen as Pritchard and Hopson to support the model. I think it’s important to celebrate successes and innovations, to praise good practice, and to value and highlight the tireless work of the remaining staff. But “bigging up” the service by eliminating the negative and accentuating the positive in our public communications doesn’t fool the voting public, it doesn’t fool the staff, and it doesn’t even fool the people pumping out the positivity.

We need an honest and open discussion about the challenges we face—not evangelism delivered with a fixed and false grin.

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¹ Moore A. NHSE director: “Overwhelmingly negative narrative must stop”. Health Serv J 2022 Sep 8. https://www.hsj.co.uk/leadership/nhse-director-overwhelmingly-negative-narrative-must-stop/7033146.article (Login needed)


