

The NHS is ill served by those who silence its honest critics

LAURA FULCHER



A new government proposal to cap legal costs for coroners' hearings means grieving families may no longer be able to challenge negligent hospitals. It risks, reinforcing the notion that the NHS is never at fault and that we must protect it in exactly the form it exists in today. With failings silenced, chances to learn lessons are lost, and mistakes only repeated.

When I became ill at 29, I faced an endless saga of errors. "You're too young for cancer," the medical soothsayers said, squinting from policy guidance and referral targets. It took a 15-month fight simply to get diagnosed. Then there were the incomprehensible, erroneous discharges: the bouncing from department to department; lost in the system, you try to find someone, anyone, to help.

My case is far from unique. Last month, research showed that the UK lags behind its European counterparts in waits for cancer diagnosis, while three-fifths of those in my situation - younger adults with bowel cancer - are diagnosed at a late stage, seriously reducing our chance of survival.

But call for improvement and everyone stares awkwardly at their toes. There is a perception that by criticising the NHS you somehow undermine the noble principles on which it's built; that highlighting

problems might leave us with the dreaded American system, ushering in Dickensian divisions of haves and have-nots. Yet compare my 15-month wait with that of banker friends waiting just days for a hospital referral. Do we have an equal system now?

Worse still, it is as if voicing criticism of the NHS somehow denigrates all the workers that toil within it. Slick marketing campaigns feature dedicated NHS staff as the embodiment of the system. Who could find fault with night nurses, feet

aching from 12-hour shifts?. It's time to separate worker from policy; humans from the system.

By making identifying failings a taboo, we promote an institutional agenda that doesn't aspire to improvements but normalises limitations. This was made very clear to me when I wrote to Theresa May to suggest specific changes. I received something tantamount to a newsletter, fingers in ears, describing all the wondrous work the NHS is doing. Writing to Jeremy Corbyn resulted in the promise of loads more NHS cash with no policy attached.

At a local level, the movement to protect the NHS, to "save" it like a damsel in distress, renders reform impossible. Moves for change are often blocked by the very population that would benefit from it - the locals, worried about privatisation and a reduction of overall service.

Tell us how it is

Yet NHS fundamentalism, which makes us cling so dogmatically to the current system, is somewhat like strapping on a suicide vest to win an argument. It'll never lead to a pragmatic discussion. Instead, it leaves the NHS despairing, in an existential crisis that will only end in its destruction as it collapses in on itself.

So let's relinquish the simplistic placards pledging to "Save our NHS". Let's not silence grieving families when things go wrong. Rather, we should discuss failings with the candour necessary to achieve a better service, wielding slogans such as "Diagnosis within 30 days!" "Learn from mistakes!" and "Give patients a voice!"

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