

Toxic mix of political and NHS failure

Analysis

In the aftermath of the Winterbourne View care home scandal Jeremy Hunt pledged to make improving the care of vulnerable patients a central mission of his time as health secretary (Oliver Wright writes).

But despite speeches, policy documents, steering groups and delivery groups two reports next week will lay bare the continued failure of the system to protect those least able to help themselves. One of those reports was commissioned by Mr Hunt's successor and Tory leadership rival, Matt Hancock. He won't be thanking him for it.

Part of the problem is political. For example, despite introducing minimum standards for how adults on mental health wards should be treated in 2014, no such standards exist for children. For that, responsibility rests with ministers.

They are also responsible for a system that provides no incentives to minimise the use of expensive in-patient mental health beds. Those beds are paid for by the NHS whereas community care is paid for by stretched local authorities.

The NHS itself should not be absolved of blame. One former Conservative health minister said they had been shocked by just how unresponsive NHS leaders were to reform. It is certainly true that the NHS has jealously guarded its freedom to set spending priorities.

Finally, despite being the authors of one of the reports the Care Quality Commission, which inspects mental health units, bears some responsibility. That it took a minister, under pressure from the media, to uncover the continued failure of these units is shocking.

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