The Diamond Anniversary of the NHS – A view from the floor

As this issue of the *Annals* goes to press, the NHS is celebrating its Diamond Anniversary. At a Royal Society of Medicine lecture, the Chief Medical Officer highlighted the historical developments in public health, culminating in the recent ban on smoking in public places. Over the last 60 years, a thin line has persisted between the interests of government and those of the health of the nation as illustrated by the reluctance of successive governments to endorse the proven link between smoking and ill health on account of perceived loss of revenue from falling cigarette sales.

An accompanying brochure listed the top sixty NHS figures – selected by a panel chosen by the *Health Services Journal*. Given the background of the panel, unsurprisingly, politicians (Margaret Thatcher and Gordon Brown included) and senior administrators topped the list. The highest-ranking surgeon (at number 31) was Sir John Charnley – curiously low in the view of the unquestionable international benefit of his pioneering arthroplasty, coupled with the momentous advances in biomedical engineering necessary to produce the initial prostheses and Charnley's own skills in operative teaching.

Many hospitals held photographic exhibits to mark the occasion. One particular photograph caught my attention – that of a ward with a highly polished floor, 20 beds with a neatly folded towel at the foot and each bed occupied by a patient who was constricted by the tightest of hospital bed linen. Each nurse wore a neat uniform with a starched collar, cuffs and hat. No *Staphylococcus aureus*, whether methicillin resistant or common or garden, would have had the temerity to attempt to defy the withering stare of the ward sister or, indeed, the energy to cross the generous space between beds.

How clinical practice has changed 60 years on: the same afternoon, modern technology had enabled me to access cross-sectional radiological images and pathology results at the touch of a button. Developments in medical instrumentation, electronics, fibre-optic technology and pharmacology had allowed two

patients in my clinic to undergo minimally invasive oesophagectomy. What progress. Of the 18 patients in my clinic, however, eight had temporary or incomplete notes, one had three separate numerical identifiers on the PMS and three should never have attended a surgical clinic. Not one letter of referral was personal – all were addressed as Dear Colleague or Dear Surgeon. Is communication a victim of Choose & Book?

Over the last 60 years, unimaginable benefits to patients have resulted from painstaking research into basic biomedical sciences, mathematics and medical engineering amongst others and the maturation of this into everyday clinical surgery. Politically driven and largely untried managerial developments (such as the NHS University and Choose & Book) arguably have resulted in poorer services to patients at an extensive and rarely acknowledged financial cost. Senior management, like the first war army staff, sit far behind the front line and know little of the consequences of their actions for the troops: sadly, the gulf between the two widens. For the profession, our trainees work half the hours of their parents: continuity of care has been lost and specialisation is leading us into a 'silo' mentality. What has not changed? Our patients are better educated in health matters, are more questioning and involved in decision making but still appear to respect and to have confidence in the medical profession. That, and the continued devotion of nurses, ambulance drivers, porters and other front-line staff give reason to be optimistic.

I have two wishes for the Platinum Anniversary – first, that the NHS should invest in people rather than systems; second, government should cease to meddle with the NHS and give it some sea room allowing it to sail unfettered for a few years. To quote Professor Karol Sikora: 'the government doesn't run supermarkets so why should they run health'.

HAPPY ANNIVERSARY

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