Response to NHS Chief Executive’s Open Call for Evidence and Ideas

Respondent ID: 25

Organisation name: Wye Valley NHS Trust

Type of response: Email
Dear Sir Ian,

I am delighted that the NHS is finally embarking on an initiative to accelerate the adoption of innovation within the NHS. However, I fear that the approach may be flawed.

I begun my management career as a member of the Unilever Companies Management Development Scheme with Birds Eye Wall's Ltd in 1988. At that time Total Quality Management (TQM) and LEAN manufacturing management were the driving forces behind Unilever's operations, specifically employed to strip cost out of systems thereby maximising margins.

I was aghast, more than 20 years later, to attend a West Midlands SHA event for Chairs and NEDS a year or more ago, at which we were given a presentation (by Ian Cumming, I think) about the potential for process efficiency and cost savings through application of LEAN principles in the NHS. We then went on to hear about developments in routine orthopaedic surgery at Robert Jones and Agness Hunt (I think) which enable very short length of stay and therefore huge cost savings and other examples of exceptional creativity WITHIN THE NHS.

Colleagues at this event agreed that this was an example of preaching to the converted, since most NEDS are from the private sector where innovation is essential to survival and is adopted (and copied!) quickly. At this point I challenged how it was that the application or adoption of such innovative developments were so isolated in the NHS and why the regional (SHA's) and national (DoH) structures do not have a role in spreading the adoption of innovative, cost saving practices and to ensure that they are used. The response was, that's the way it is and has always been in the NHS, a culture of "not invented here". Following the event I was approached by the SHA to speak at an event at which NEDS would share their relevant private sector experience with NHS execs. The event was postponed and never went ahead!

I am glad to say that my own Trust is ahead of the game in this respect for the NHS as we introduced LEAN and Productive Ward many years ago. However, when I discussed the progress reported re. orthopaedic surgery at RJAH with our medical director the response was a straight "it wouldn't work here"!!!

I experienced this again as a member of the Transition Board over-seeing the integration of social care, community care and acute care to form an integrated care organisation for Herefordshire. My suggestion that we visit other Trusts that had embarked on integration of parts of their health community to learn from them was greeted with blank faces. It was only my insistence that we do this to learn strengths and weaknesses from elsewhere that resulted in some invaluable insights to the approach in Cumbria, Torbay, Hampshire, Dudley and Lewisham. This in turn has usefully informed the model devised for Herefordshire.

So, in short, I do not believe the problem is with lack of innovation either within or without the NHS but with a culture in which networking is virtually non-existent and where managers and clinicians/consultants think they know best and are unwilling to open their minds to the possibility of learning from others.

I would welcome the opportunity to discuss my observations after 8 years in the NHS NED role further with you.

Kind regards,

Caroline Brown
Non-Executive Director
Deputy Chairman