



Happier, more engaged NHS staff lead to better patient care

If care is to become more patient focused, the health service needs an improved culture from board to ward

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Guardian Professional, Monday 4 March 2013 08.30 GMT



More than eight out of 10 healthcare professionals believe their role makes a difference to patients.

Photograph: Alamy

Patients should be at the heart of the [NHS](#). This is a familiar message, and one that has been repeated in every major health policy document for more than a decade. A worthy aim, undoubtedly – but who is responsible for turning rhetoric into reality?

Robert Francis QC last month presented the long-awaited final report of the public inquiry into Mid Staffordshire NHS foundation trust. The second of his 290 recommendations makes clear the importance of those on the frontline: all NHS staff "must adopt and demonstrate a shared culture where patient is the priority". Strong leadership and a common set of core values are vital and to achieve this there needs to be good communication between senior management and frontline staff.

The NHS is the world's fifth largest employer. The tenth annual [NHS staff survey](#), published last week, saw more than 100,000 of the 1.4 million NHS employees in England giving their views on what it is like to work for the service. The survey, run by the Picker Institute for the Department of Health, is a vital source of information for understanding and improving the experience of staff in the NHS, and in turn helping to provide better care for patients.

The survey found that only a third (34%) reported that communication between senior management and staff was effective. While 74% were able to make suggestions to improve the work of their team or department, only a quarter (26%) said senior managers act on staff feedback. It seems that there is some way to go in creating the kind of culture that is so important to improving the quality of services.

From next year, the staff survey is set to be part of the friends and family test, a hot topic in the NHS. Part of the funding allocated to acute trusts will depend on increasing the proportion of staff who agree that "if a friend or relative needed treatment, I would be happy with the standard of care provided by this organisation".

So what do the 2012 results look like for this question? Some 63% of respondents agreed

with the statement but scores vary greatly between staff groups. Only 41% of arts therapy staff agreed with the statement, compared with 73% of staff in the general management group. Recent work by researchers at Imperial College tells us there is a correlation between engaged staff and quality of care; happier staff lead to better patient care. This makes the variation in scores a concern; improving the experience of all staff is vital.

Although there is progress to be made, the survey also tells us that the vast majority of NHS employees feel they are making a contribution to the workplace. More than eight out of ten (83%) believe their role makes a difference to patients. Some of the highest scores for this question were found from allied health professionals, particularly art therapists (95%) and physiotherapists (94%).

As a rule, NHS employees care about their work: they want to deliver a service that is patient-centred and high quality. Moreover, they feel positive about the difference that they are able to make as individuals. What seems to be missing is the wider organisational culture: the shared vision from board to ward that features so strongly in the Francis report. This is the challenge, and it is the NHS organisations with a positive culture who engage and empower their staff that put themselves in the best position to deliver world-class patient care.

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