

Cleaning up the NHS - paying a little and getting a lot just cannot be done

There has been much debate over the merits of the policy to tender NHS contracts for cleaning services. Since its inception, there have been claims and counter claims over which system serves the NHS the best. Derek Butler asks 'Does the NHS receive value for money employing its own cleaners, or does tendering offer better value for money on cleaning contracts?'

In the intervening 20 years since competitive tendering for cleaning services was introduced, the Government, NHS Managers & Trade Unions have argued their corner on what works best for the NHS. I have watched this debate with interest for many years as a customer, and since becoming Chair of MRSA Action UK, attended conferences where opposing sides have debated their case for and against contract cleaners. However I have yet to be convinced over the argument of using contract cleaners verses the NHS' own employees.

As Chair of the only registered Charity in the UK that supports victims of healthcare infections our primary concern is not about who fulfils the role to clean our hospitals, but more about how that contract is carried out. Whilst the Government, NHS Managers and Unions debate and argue their case of the merits of either system, the real victims in all of this are the patients. Having a hospital look clean does not necessarily mean it is hygienically clean; it is those things we cannot see, the bacteria, which cause harm.

Cleaning hospitals does not require enormous amounts of money, but it does require leadership, discipline, ownership, training and the correct attitude. It requires leadership at the patient level; the patients' interest should supersede those who hold the purse strings within the NHS. The cleaning of our hospitals should be more about quality, and not about cost.

I am reminded of a quote from John Ruskin (1819- 1900) where he said, "The common law of business balance prohibits paying a little and getting a lot, it just cannot be done. If you deal with the lowest bidder, then it is well to add something for the risk

you run. And if you do that you will have enough to pay for something better"

The government and NHS managers should ensure that no matter who performs the cleaning of our hospitals, contract cleaners or NHS staff, our hospitals must meet the highest standards of cleanliness and this must be attained and sustained. Failure to do so is inexcusable and the Trade Unions have the responsibility to ensure that their members have the time, training and the tools to attain this high standard of cleanliness. A high standard of cleanliness is a marker diligence for the NHS, failure to achieve high standards reflects on the hospital, the staff and undermines the confidence that the public and patients have in the NHS and for their safety.

'...it is time to stop the finger pointing of who is to blame for the poor cleanliness of our hospitals'

As the Chair of MRSA Action UK, I believe it is time to stop the finger pointing of who is to blame for the sometimes poor cleanliness of our hospitals. We must focus on the real issues of hospital cleanliness that of supporting the cleaning teams with the tools, resources and the time to perform their duties, be they contract or NHS staff. Cleanliness is everyone's business. Failure to achieve the highest standards of cleanliness puts patients' lives at risk, and the British public deserve no less than the highest standard when they go into an NHS hospital, anything less would be a betrayal.