The Last Medical Decade

The 00s decade has passed on. It has been a troubled one for medicine. Adverse medical stories have frequently overshadowed genuine scientific and clinical advancements. One medical commentator recently observed that the better we get the worse we get. Advances in medical diagnosis and improvements in treatment have not met with widespread public enthusiasm. The negative perceptions about healthcare delivery have tended to predominate. This is disappointing. It patients should have confidence and reassurance in the healthcare system that is providing their care. We need to find new ways to restore our patients confidence. Medicine is losing the public relations challenge.

William Reville, Irish Times 8/10/10 stated the media tends to give all voices equal weight and unjustified fears promoted by amateur groups easily take root in the public mind.

The 2000s decade got off to a bad start with the conviction of Harold Shipman in January 2000. He was found guilty of the murder of 15 patients and he may have killed as many as 150 more. The subsequent inquiry headed by Dame Janet Smith stated that Shipman damaged good name of the medical profession and had caused many patients to doubt whether they can trust their family doctor. Subsequently the General Medical Council introduced major reforms including 5 yearly performance checks.

In Ireland the Neary story was an important catalyst in the implementation of changes in guidelines for doctors by the Medical Council. The Harding Enquiry into the circumstances surrounding the events at the obstetrics department at Our Lady of Lourdes Hospital, Drogheda was published in 2008. She stated that clinical independence can no longer be interpreted as a licence for arrogance, disregard for patient choice, dignity and the need for freedom from accountability. She noted that nice doctors are in a position to do great harm if they inadequately trained, have poor judgement or have developed poor practices. In her recommendations she stressed the importance of the careful collection of clinical data and the critical analysis of the organisations performance. There must be an atmosphere of open discussion and debate where all those involved in the care of the patient are listened to.

The Lindsay Tribunal into HIV and Hepatitis C infection in haemophiliacs was published in 2002. A total of 104 patients with Haemophilia contracted HIV and 217 developed Hepatitis C. Imported commercial factor VIII became available in 1974. Nine years later it emerged that this factor VIII was the source of most of the HIV contamination among Haemophiliacs.

Public Health, a specialty previously overshadowed by more glamorous areas of medicine, was thrust into the limelight. Jeremy Laudance explains that the reason for its new importance is that it deals with large numbers and scary themes such as pandemics, smoking and cancer, alcohol and drugs, obesity and increased mortality. On the 29th March 2004 Michael Martin, Minister for Health and Children introduced smoke-free workplaces regulations. In his statement the Minister pointed out that even if you are a non-smoker you can get cancer from other peoples smoke. The measure has been a considerable success and has been subsequently adopted in many other European countries.

Pandemic Flu outbreaks have occupied our time and efforts repeatedly over the past 10 years. In 2003 SARS (severe acute respiratory syndrome) caused global concern. In claimed 900 lives. In 2004 the Avian Flu emerged from the Far East and led to 262 deaths. More recently during last winter we have had to grapple with Swine Flu and the introduction of a vaccine within a short turn round time. Despite being H1N1 its uptake has been relatively poor with only 25% of the population availing of the vaccine. On the other hand the HPV vaccine has not been free leading to widespread criticism of the Minister. Following the recent announcement that it is to be added to the vaccination programme it will be interesting to monitor its uptake rate. The populations love hate relationship with vaccination was well illustrated by the MMR vaccine debacle. Shortly before the beginning of the 2000s there was a paper in the Lancet linking MMR vaccination with bowel disease and autism. Vaccination rates fell to rates as low as 75% in some part of the country with a serious outbreak of measles. Although the paper was quickly discredited the public's suspicions about the MMR vaccine has lasted throughout the 10 years. Vaccines by their very nature are contentious.Former anti-vaxxers are prominent in all major events and will continue to be so, providing a barrier to progression of vaccination programs.

Healthcare workers have been affected by the high speed of change in technology and management. Organisations have had to learn how to manage information and clinical care, whilst maintaining patient care standards. The ‘00s decade has seen a move towards evidence based medicine and the need for lifelong learning has been highlighted as a necessity for medical professionals.

During the decade the problem of hospital acquired infection become a political hot potato. Hospitals and their boards were taken aback by the depth of public anger. MRSA and C. Difficile, previously obscure organisms, became household names. Patient groups have forcefully made the point that they do not accept that individuals being treated in hospital may contract a complicating infection. Changing behaviour is difficult particularly in relation to hand washing but progress has been made. There has been a positive response and our hospitals have become safer. A culture of hand-washing and infection containment has been embraced by healthcare workers.

Organ donation became a distressing issue for both bereaved relatives and the population at large. It commenced in the UK in association with the excessive number of cardiac deaths in children treated at Bristol Royal Infirmary. Similar practices of organ retention without consent were found to have occurred in Irish hospitals. There was widespread public debate. Parents and doctors were placed on opposing sides of what became a bitter sequence of exchanges. The Madden Report (2005) noted that the problem was that the retention of organs was not known by the patients and their families and the resultant process of decision making was inappropriate. In 2006 he stated the media tends to give all voices equal weight and unjustified fears promoted by amateur groups easily take root in the public mind.

There has been a need to have a new beginning in which doctors and families work in partnership. This is not easy particularly in relation to hand washing but progress has been made. There has been a positive response and our hospitals have become safer. A culture of hand-washing and infection containment has been embraced by healthcare workers.

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