Rediscovering Lost Values: Professor Aidan Halligan: Doolin Lecture 2014

Abstract:

The 2014 Doolin Lecture was delivered by Aidan Halligan. Professor Halligan is an internationally renowned figure in his field. He was the first NHS director of Clinical Governance and served as the Deputy Chief Medical Officer for England. His clinical background is in obstetrics and in an earlier period of his career he was Professor of Fetal Medicine at Leicester University. He says that despite his long tenure in the UK he has maintained his Irish identity and uses it to his advantage.

Halligan is one of the stars of patient safety and good clinical governance. He stands shoulder to shoulder with his US counterparts Atul Gawande, Donald Berwick and Peter Provonost. This group of doctors straddle the surface between the traddie values of medicine and the modern, more impersonal application of the new technological advances. Currently healthcare is struggling to reassert the balance and achieve a novel more caring, and more patient safety aware equipoise.

Halligan is working in the North of England in a major project called Well North. He is trying to tackle the major health issues of the underprivileged across 9 cities with high levels of deprivation. The 3 things that the Public Health nurses, who work with him, commonly encounter among their patients are financial debt, domestic violence and lack of self worth. The difference in life expectancy between Bradford and Gilford is 19 years. Behaviour is what leads to higher morbidity and early death. Education teaches individuals to control their emotions. In its absence, personal crises are dealt with by violence, drinking and substance abuse rather than by reasoning.

A substantial portion of the lecture was taken up with the concept of leadership and all it entails. Halligan pointed out that there are 53,221 books on leadership available on Amazon. Leaders inspire you. They make you more determined to achieve your goals. Doctors are supposed to be leaders but get no training for the role at medical school. However, becoming a doctor changes how people view you and how you view yourself. Leadership can be a lonely place. A leader cannot allow loyalty and friendship to trump the safety of the organization as happened in Mid-Staffordshire. Leaders earn the respect of others by how much they care. They are frequently criticized for trying to improve or change current practices. They must be brave and stand up for their principles. They must also be aware that the difference between a halo and a noose is only 2 inches. Cicily Saunders, a pioneer in the development of the hospice movement and palliative care, faced many obstacles in the early years. Despite all the barriers she won through and left an invaluable legacy.

Halligan has interesting and novel ideas about management and how the current structures function. He says that meetings are a block to progress and all that really matters is what you do and what you achieve. Negotiations about annual budgets are like dancing around the handbags and involve a lot of posturing before the bottom line is reached. He stresses the importance of accountants and how their fiscal decisions can impact on patient care and clinical outcomes. They need to be better informed about medical illness and its consequences. The downstream outcome of their deliberations can impact significantly on the lives of sick patients.

He spoke at length about clinical governance. Dysfunctional institutions are not populated by bad people but rather poorly led people. Bullying remains a big concern in large organisations like the NHS. It leads to sub-optimal clinical performance and makes healthcare workers afraid to speak up when they see things that are not right. He gave an example of hospital hierarchy and the sense of helplessness that it engenders. He described how a consultant, on a ward round with his junior staff, repeatedly failed to engage with an anxious elderly patient because her case notes were not readily available to him. The interaction had a very negative effect on the surgical intern who was feeling already stressed and disillusioned. He was fully aware that you cannot challenge your consultant. Halligan points out that the situation could have been easily averted by the consultant putting his hand in the patient’s hand and saying ‘don’t worry I’ll come back and talk to you shortly.’

In unresponsive organisations, it is always too early to act until it is too late to respond. When reviewing medical mishaps, the 5 words that Halligan commonly hears are it could not happen here. A common error made by hospitals is concentrating their energies on managing the communication rather than addressing the error. Emotions must be carefully kept in check. The challenge of good governance is the facility being able to do the right thing on the difficult days.

The words kindness, compassion and integrity are mentioned on a number of occasions. Patients need kindness throughout their journey through the healthcare system. It is not the property of any particular grade of staff. Halligan recounts the story of Dolly, a long-standing ward receptionist, who through simple acts of kindness had a major impact on the lives of both patients and staff. Compassion cannot be contrived. It is an important attribute for anyone caring for sick patients. While it isn’t an alternative to clinical skill, it makes the patient’s passage through their illness more bearable and comfortable. Integrity is what you do when nobody is looking. It is not easy because it requires one to be honest with strong moral principles. The public perceives doctors to have integrity with a 92% public trust compared with 13% for politicians.
Halligan spoke also about the homeless. He has set up a health service for them and is chairman of Pathway a support organisation. He points out that managers became interested in the problem when it was demonstrated that their healthcare costs 8 times more than the rest of the population. Among the cohort that he was following, 25% died within 1 year. The average age of death was 42 years. He commended the current movement in Ireland to tackle homelessness. He said that we had already gone much further than other countries. The Government has pledged to end long-term homelessness by 2016. In a spontaneous act of kindness, customers of a Dublin shop bought 900 blankets over a 3 day period. In Dublin, alone, there are 140 people sleeping rough nightly. Focus Ireland estimates that at any one time there are 5,000 people homeless across the State.

Aidan Halligan gave his entire presentation without slides or notes. It was very different to most modern talks in which the audience looks at the slides and listens to the lecturer. In this talk the audience both looked at and listened to the lecturer. His delivery and its content were inspiring and compelling. It made us all want to go back to work and do a better job.

JFA Murphy
Editor

Comments: