

Is healthcare a **business?**

Let's get down to business as unusual



FOR MANY YEARS I railed against the notion that nursing or health care was a 'business' with 'customers'. The idea that seeing a loved one injured in Intensive Care or accompanying your child into the world of chemotherapy bore any equivalence to buying a shirt or selling hamburgers seemed almost offensive. As for the thought that great nursing could be prescribed and dictated as some kind of scripted, customer-pleasing 'competence' – don't start me.

The corporatising of health care and its management only fuelled my contempt. In the UK in the 1980s Sir Roy Griffiths championed 'general management' in the NHS and the prevailing wisdom soon became that anyone who had ever run a shoe shop or trucking

company could run a hospital or a health service. A business was a business was a business after all.

I can't decide whether age or wisdom has tempered my views but I no longer have a problem with health care being seen as a business. Here's why.

Health care worldwide is a multi-billion dollar enterprise and to imagine that this entire edifice will function without any business sensibility seems naive, if not arrogant. There is a deeply ingrained public sector entitlement mindset that sees health care as an almost exclusive arrangement between a health professional and a patient/client that must remain unsullied by any considerations of costs, apart from the 'system' must continually cough up 'more resources' whenever asked.

I remember watching a conference speaker going for the cheapest of claps by bemoaning the 'bean-counters' employed in health care. Trust me, if you are a taxpayer watching over 112 billion 'beans' per year being spent on health care, then you will assuredly want to have some really good 'bean-counters' working at looking after your investment and making sure you get value for your money.

A common objection to health care being seen as a business is that we in health care are on the side of the angels, not like those nasty, unscrupulous bankers, 'fat cats', developers and other shonks. This is more a tissue person than straw man argument. Why is the business world exemplified by its worst examples, rather than its best? If the only choice available for health care was to be a business like Bernie Madoff, Exxon or Imperial Tobacco, then as Sam Goldwyn said, include me out.

Imagine though that health care was a different kind of business, a business characterised by enthusiasm, ingenuity, ethics, enterprise, integrity and a passion to serve our customers (read patients/clients/community) that was off the Richter scale.

Imagine if nursing was the Apple of health professions, leading the world in innovation, design and sheer quality of product/service.

Imagine if your hospital was the Ritz-Carlton or Four Seasons of patient/client service, lauded worldwide for your attention to detail and tireless devotion to your guests' experiences.

Imagine if your health service was the Zappos of workplace engagement and culture



PHILIP DARBYSHIRE

Adjunct Professor,
University of Western
Sydney
Professor,
Monash University

where staff were more like family or fans and where recruitment, retention or morale were never an issue. Would I like to be part of that kind of business? In a heartbeat.

Another objection to the idea of health care as a business is that this will inevitably compromise interpersonal communication and the profound nature of the health professional/patient/client relationship. Genuine communication will be replaced with the robotic banality of the 'Have a nice day' script, what Austin calls "Would you like empathy with that".

This is a potent red flag but again, the enemy identified is a caricature. Truly, there are few communicative forms more guaranteed to induce rage or nausea than the 'Your call is important to us' platitudes. These abominations are not however, the exclusive preserve of the worst of the business world. Health care is more than capable of such banality. Ask any hospital complaints office to name the top three complaint areas that they deal with and if 'communication' isn't there, I'll work a double shift in the nearest call centre. To further disabuse ourselves of the notion that we in health have some kind of moral or communicative superiority here, try reading some of the execrable 'hospital responses' at the end of the Patients' Association 2009 report *Patients Not Numbers*.

The idea that we in health care are above learning something valuable about communication and engagement with people from some of the exemplary businesses mentioned above is pure preciousness. Health care is a business so let's get down to business as unusual. [ha](#)

