

How Care Pathways obliterate care

More industrial follies from the NHS

David Zigmond

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Overschematisation in complex welfare will usually yield results quite different from those intended.

Recently many seemed shocked by the malign metamorphosis of the Liverpool Care Pathway. For here we have an attempt to mass-produce and standardise compassionate palliative care for the terminally ill then contorting to a designed *absence* of care that combines shocking insensitivity, psychopathic expedience (hastening death to vacate usable bed-space) and chilling indifference to the suffering of the dying and their relatives. I am not shocked but wearily despondent: I work in a health service where 'progress' is increasingly defined by the displacement of the best, discriminating personal healthcare by didactic, 'expert-committee' generated *systems* which attempt to command quality by prescribing some kind of uniform plan. Industrialisation of dying sounds stark; it is. Most such schemes are doomed to very serious losses of personal connection and imaginative compassionate understanding. In any matters of human complexity institutional schemes and human understandings are often countervailed, unless we take great care.

The story of the Liverpool Care Pathway is like a Brothers Grimm fairy story even more unfit for children. It is an example of what can happen if we do not take that care. For the care of the dying is a poignant and delicate dance: each encounter requires unique responses of contact, utterances, understandings and technicalities. This is fine and fragile work that calls on any practitioner's capacities of empathic imagination quite as much as technical knowledge. It is the discriminating weaving of these that makes up the *art* of Medicine. With the characteristic follies and losses of our times we have largely crushed or displaced both the habitats and activities of such art in our healthcare in an attempt to get factory-like efficiency, compliance and uniformity.

Healing and palliation are complex interactions that arise from human kinship, not object-like management. Mind-sets and management modes from industry or commerce have very limited contributions to make to complex welfare. It is when their influence exceeds this that we have the toxic moral vacuum phenomena of Mid-Staffs or the Liverpool Care Pathway.

Ideas that seem easy in areas of great human complexity usually have a large and horrible price. As the philosopher Alfred North Whitehead said: 'seek simplicity, then always mistrust it'.

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