

Health & Wellness

'Doctors must learn care and compassion': Prince Charles claims modern medicine is putting the 'human touch' at risk

Jenny Hope
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- His Royal Highness makes heartfelt plea to medical profession
- NHS should foster climate of care and compassion, he says
- Intervention follows series of appalling cases highlighted by the *Daily Mail*



Prince Charles talking to staff at The Centre for Defence Medicine based at the Queen Elizabeth Hospital, Birmingham, during a recent visit

The Health Service must learn to listen to its patients and be more caring, Prince Charles said yesterday.

Modern medicine and technology are putting the 'human touch' at risk, according to the heir to the throne.

In a heartfelt plea, he said medical schools should try to foster a climate of care and compassion among doctors.

Charles's intervention follows a series of reports of appalling treatment by NHS staff, including dying patients left screaming for water.

He called on doctors and nurses to heed what patients say so they can develop the 'healing empathy' so badly needed.

Writing in the *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine*, the prince set out a vision apparently in response to studies showing many patients feel ignored.

He said: 'In the individual encounter between patient and clinician, we are led to believe that there is currently a "crisis in caring". I am sure that this is not the case in many or most such encounters.

'Nevertheless, I am equally sure that there is much more that can be done to foster and enhance those age-old qualities of human kindness and compassion.

'The media is full of instances where these have been palpably lacking, and I have heard of others speaking of

the need to restore urgently a climate of care and compassion at the heart of our health services.'

Last month, Health Secretary Jeremy Hunt said there was a 'kind of normalisation of cruelty' in the worst hospitals, with patients too often subjected to coldness, resentment, indifference and even contempt.

Ann Clwyd, Labour MP for Cynon Valley, broke down when describing how her husband of 49 years, Owen Roberts, 'died like a battery hen' in October after being admitted to the University Hospital of Wales in Cardiff.

And, in an unprecedented move, the Chief Nursing Officer for England says nurses will now be formally judged on the compassion they show in 'treating patients with dignity and respect'.

The *Daily Mail* has highlighted abuses of patient care in its Dignity for the Elderly campaign. In his article, the prince said there was unease about poor listening skills that ultimately let down patients.

One senior professional had impressed upon him the need to equip staff 'with skills and a desire to listen and honour what is being said and - importantly - what is not said to them'.

Charles said a healing empathy could only develop with a 'thorough understanding of the patient's story'.

Despite his reputation as a supporter of alternative medicine, the Prince of Wales stressed he did not want to confront accepted medical wisdom. But, he said, the best of science and technology must not be deployed 'at the expense of the human elements'.

The prince has endorsed homeopathy and has had treatment from herbalists and chiropractors for ailments including severe back pain. He says complementary therapies should be used alongside conventional medicine.

But he has been criticised by leading medical figures including Nobel prize-winners, for backing therapies they claim undermine treatments proven to work and may even put patients at risk.

In his guest editorial, the prince said he had long advocated truly integrated systems of providing health and care 'not without criticism'.

But the need for a wider perspective on healthcare remained, particularly when the lack of compassion undermined the very purpose of doctors' training.

He said: 'It is particularly surprising so many appear to think there is a gap here, when we are told those so-called "soft skills" of caring can have a significant impact on the quality and pace of recovery among patients.'

'This inevitably raises the question: "Are we doing enough to ensure there is sufficient empathy and compassion instilled throughout training in medical schools and in later hospital training?"

'Should we not, perhaps, be doing more to enhance the length of contact and continuity, when it comes to relationships between professionals and patients?

'It appears to many ... that our capacity for providing "the human touch" has steadily decreased as science and technology have improved.

Surely, it should not be either/or? Thus, it seems to me good medicine should aim for a better balance between what science and technology may demand and what patients may actually want and need.'

Dr Kamran Abbasi, the journal's editor, said: 'This is an important article and the prince's vision for health is engaging.'

A Department of Health spokesman said: 'Ensuring that patients get the best possible care is a priority. We have been clear that quality of care needs to be valued as highly as the quality of treatment. '

'Nursing leaders recently launched a new drive to ensure values such as compassion and courage are at the heart of the NHS and the public health and care sectors.'

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