Better training needed to improve health care

Dr Neale Fong

Our great State has been through one of the golden ages as far as health expenditure is concerned. Over the past decade we have spent more than $7 billion in building hospitals and we now have the most modern and best-equipped facilities in the nation.

Over seven years our health budget has increased from $4.3 billion to $8 billion. Money, money everywhere. What then is the solution to our seeming continuing crises in health care — long waiting times, ambulance ramping, disillusioned and overworked staff and unhappy consumers? What should now be very clear is that more money and more resources alone will never solve our problems.

Why can’t we get health care right? In answering my own question, let me pose another question.

Can you imagine someone running a business with hundreds of staff, budgets of millions of dollars, with life and death outcomes, with no real credentials or training in how to manage or lead it? I would think not.

Welcome to the world of health care in Australia where we have hundreds of healthcare units, departments and organisations of all types and sizes being managed by staff, all who are trying their best, but who are inadequately trained and insufficiently supported for leadership roles.

It is estimated that there are more than 30,000 people in leadership and management positions in the Australian health system. Yet there is no comprehensive credentialling system, nor a requirement for continuing professional development.

The peak body attempting to provide some of these services, the Australasian College of Health Service Management, has only 2500 paying members and is led mainly by volunteers who on top of their day jobs work to help other leaders and managers grow and develop. It is probably scandalous that health care is one of the few industries that requires no professional preparation to manage the complex and expensive services and infrastructure that patients and communities rely on.

The hospital and health care sector combines every discipline in business — it deals with a spaghetti-bowl system of financing, insurance and payments; it involves every level of government; it is global in its impact; it employs some of the smartest people as caring and curing professionals; it always features in the media with stories of triumph and tragedy and it is the hottest political potato with politicians.

The evidence is convincing that the efficient and effective use of all resources and the quality of healthcare services provided is improved by enhancing the management capacity of leaders and teams. Yet, there are two key barriers to healthcare organisations realising the benefits of professional management. The first is the lack of adequate management preparation in the training of many healthcare leaders. The second, the role of healthcare management, is not as valued as the roles of clinical providers. I am one who has made the transition from clinical work (seeing and treating patients) to management. For me it was a career choice, which I have found challenging and rewarding. I took this path and I trained accordingly, and I have maintained my commitment to education, learning and development.

Many of our managers, however, are thrown in at the deep end. Some get to be in charge and are expected to lead because they are a great doctor or nurse. But just as every great AFL footballer doesn’t make a great coach, nor does every health professional go on to be a competent healthcare manager or leader — without the right training and support.

So what is the answer to our seemingly endless struggle to make our healthcare system work? The evidence is clear. The quality of the leadership and management is directly proportional to the quality of the outcome. We get it when we see our brilliant heart surgeons operate. They most often get outstanding results. The same applies to those leading and managing our health system.

These leaders must be supported in improving their capabilities to steer the changes descending upon our systems. They are the ones who will inspire colleagues to be courageous in driving innovation and who must know how to work in teams to fix problems and produce better outcomes.

We understand the need to invest in lots of things for a better future. In football, we understand the need to have a big talent pool to draft from. Over time, after skilling, training and experience, players are blooded into the big-time competition, many going on to become AFL stars. If only we invested the same attitude, resources and money in developing our health leaders and managers.

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