A fairer, more inclusive NHS for patients and staff

18 May 2016

During Equality, Diversity and Human Rights Week (16-20 May), an initiative led by NHS Employers to create a fairer, more inclusive NHS for patients and staff, HEE’s Chair, Sir Keith Pearson gives his vision on the Workforce Race Equality Standard which is helping to ensure the NHS has a workforce that is fully diverse, at all levels, of the society and patients that it serves.

Can you explain the WRES and the vision you have for HEE and other NHS organisations?

The WRES was introduced in April 2015 in response to a recommendation from the NHS Equality and Diversity Council that there was a need to ensure employees from black and minority ethnic (BAME) backgrounds have equal access to career opportunities and receive fair treatment in the workplace.

The WRES gives local NHS organisations, employing almost all of the 1.4 million NHS workforce, the tools to work out their workforce race equality performance and demonstrate progress against a number of indicators of workforce equality, including a specific indicator to address the low levels of BAME representation at senior management and board level.

My vision is that we should reach a point where all NHS Boards have a detailed understanding of how their organisations are performing against the WRES? key indicators, and are committed to taking action to improve performance against the requirements of the WRES.

Boards need to really understand that, through demonstrating a genuine commitment and investment to equality and diversity, the workforce will feel more supported and committed to the organisation. Ultimately, failing to meet expectations around equality and diversity can lead to a disengaged workforce and compromised care for patients.

We are far more likely to meet the needs of all the patients we’re here to serve when NHS leadership is drawn from diverse communities across the country, and when all our frontline staff are themselves free from discrimination.

What is your role in the WRES and why were you keen to be involved?

I chair the WRES advisory group, succeeding Lord Prior, who chaired the group before being appointed as a Minister at the Department of Health. Having previously been chair at the NHS Confederation, where I was committed to promoting race equality, I was keen to remain engaged in this agenda. Recognising that HEE is the workforce organisation for the NHS, it seemed a natural fit that I support the WRES.

I passionately believe that discrimination, in all forms, must be challenged, no one should be inhibited by their ethnicity, or any other protected characteristic (as defined by the Equality Act) and that there must be equal access to opportunity for everyone in having careers in the NHS in which they can achieve their full potential.

In the time since the WRES was introduced, what do you see as the main successes that have been achieved?
A year ago the WRES wasn’t a topic of conversation and was little known. Now it is known, with the WRES being included in NHS standard contracts, and NHS organisations, having responded to the WRES survey, have data to build a better baseline on current performance, and how good they should be. There is a sign that organisations are becoming more open and honest about the areas they need to prioritise. This commitment to honesty is a positive sign and bodes well for the future.

_Apart from your own commitment, do you feel there is enough commitment to equality and diversity by the HEE Board and Executive Team?_

Yes, I think there is a willingness, both by the Board and Executive, to continue to improve HEE’s credentials on how it takes forward equality and diversity. Non-executive director Kate Nealon has been providing considerable leadership, through chairing the Advancing HEE’s Equality and Diversity (AHEAD) group. I am also pleased that we have been able to appoint Jacynth Ivey as a non-exec director on the Board.

Moving forward, I would like to see the Board be in a position where it can satisfy itself that equality has been mainstreamed into our recruitment processes, and there has been equal access of opportunity to all HEE positions.

**What should HEE do to promote greater diversity in senior leadership roles?**

Every time we advertise senior roles we need to ask ourselves whether we are using media channels that encourage, as widely as possible, a diverse pool of applicants.

We should also ensure that there is BAME representation on each recruitment panel, who can give advice and encourage consideration about the cultural diversity of candidates.

_Do you have any final thoughts?_

It is sad that we don’t yet have a workforce that is fully diverse, at all levels, of the society and patients that we serve. There is room for improvement, but I am confident that more people, of diverse ethnicities, are breaking through.

Young people see cultural diversity as the norm, and they have an important role to play as a catalyst for change and in supporting the NHS to become a place where a diverse workforce is accepted as a matter of fact.

Lastly, I would encourage people to have the confidence to ask one another questions about cultural differences, as that can lead to dispelling any preconceived ideas that may be held.

You can read more about the WRES at [https://www.england.nhs.uk/about/gov/equality-hub/equality-standard/][1]

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