Former boss of NHS England: Short-term thinking to blame for workforce crisis

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The government's failure to draw up and implement a long-term plan to improve the health and care workforce has resulted in the chronic shortages currently affecting all areas of the NHS.

That's the view expressed by Sir David Nicholson, the former chief executive of NHS England and currently chair at Sandwell and West Birmingham Hospitals, NHS Trust, and Dudley Group NHS Foundation Trust.

Speaking to Newcross Healthcare's Voice of Care podcast, Sir David says he believe the workforce challenge which has seen nurses and other healthcare professionals leaving the NHS in record numbers and tens of thousands of healthcare roles remain unfilled, is on an unprecedented scale.

"It's been coming for some time. And I think the disappointing aspect of this is the lack of response over a number of years, predominantly from government to put this thing right. One of the dilemmas we have in the NHS is to train our professional workforce, in particular.

"It takes time and planning and organization. It takes a big set of effort, time and resources to enable it to happen and we haven't seen that over the last 12 years.

"Looking at 3-to-5-year time horizon through spending reviews simply won't deliver the kind of workforce that we need in the NHS."

Questioned further about the lack of a workforce strategy for the NHS, Sir David goes on to say:

"If we're waiting for cavalry to come over the hill, we're going to be waiting a long time. We're going to have to, as organizations, as a system, really rethink what we're doing and deal with those things that we have control over. It isn't it all terrible, we've got 100,000 vacancies. We need a plan to get over that. And so, what can we actually do? And that's, what I'm interested in and that's what the NHS and social care has to be interested in."

With the recruitment and retention seen as crucial to solving the current workforce crisis, Sir David says it's important for the NHS Trusts to properly engage with staff and provide meaningful opportunities for learning and development.

He cites the work that Sandwell and West Birmingham NHS Trust has done with homeless people as an example of what can be achieved.

"There are thousands of homeless young people in Sandwell. We're building a brand-new hospital in the centre. It's a fabulous thing that we're building there. And we've worked with St Basils charity, and we've recruited 30 apprentices amongst homeless people and we're providing them with accommodation as well as work. So, 30 people who would never have dreamt of being involved can come in at entry level. That could be as a health care assistant, it could be as a porter, or something like that. And we have an escalation program to take them through an apprenticeship, to take them through if they want professional qualifications at the end of it. That seems to me absolutely central to what we need we need to do, and it's an incredibly successful way of working and engages us with the community in a way that we haven't."

Hosted by healthcare expert Suhail Mirza, the podcast episode featuring Sir David Nicholson is available now alongside previous episodes in the series on Newcross Healthcare website https://www.newcrosshealthcare.com/voicesofcare as well as on YouTube, Spotify, Apple and a range of other podcast platforms.

You can see the full podcast here: https://youtu.be/pP2XnWskwd4

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