NHS boss reveals high street plan to fix staff shortages

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The boss of one of the biggest NHS trusts in the country has spelled out his vision for making life better for its 15,000 staff, whilst also admitting current pressures on the NHS have become ‘increasingly dangerous and critical’.

Richard Mitchell is chief executive of University Hospitals of Leicester, which serves a population of around 1 million in Leicester, Leicestershire and Rutland and employs 15,000 staff.

In an honest and stark interview with Newcross Healthcare’s Voices of Care podcast, Mr Mitchell reflected on his first year in charge of the Trust and changes it has made to improve conditions for staff and help them through the cost-of-living crisis.

The NHS is currently undergoing the worst recruitment crisis in its history and Mr Mitchell also outlined measures to recruit more staff.

Changes include:

- A local high street presence to recruit from the area
- Resolving the ‘embarrassing’ situation which has seen some staff not paid on time
- A drive to recruit more staff from India
- A series of measures, including child clothing vouchers and free use of washing machines, to help staff through the cost-of-living crisis

Commenting on the intense pressure on NHS resources, Mr Mitchell said:

“We face many challenges like the wider NHS, workforce, access, growing demand for our services, money, and many other things. But I certainly think workforce is the biggest challenge. I can say that over my 21 years, it now feels certainly more difficult than it has done at any part to bring that to life.

“I was on call last night, I was in the emergency department at the infirmary until pretty late in the evening. What I saw in the emergency department were a lot of people trying to access emergency services. We're seeing a huge demand on our services against a backdrop of the workforce is exceptionally tired, the workforce is aging, so people are looking to retire.

“Maybe some of the attraction of working in the NHS that had been there previously, isn't there? So, you've got growing demand and workforce pressures… It certainly feels increasingly dangerous and critical to me. I think we are reaching a crisis point now.”

Mr Mitchell said that one of the big priorities of his first year in charge was to identify improvements for staff. He added:

“We identified 12 key things focusing on getting the basics in place. That entails things like access to safe car parking, ideally co-located on site, making sure that the food provision is better than the past, making sure that we have high quality food, that it's low-cost food, making sure that the Wi-Fi works.

“I think we're making some progress, but there's more to do. Another thing we're doing is making sure that the organisation is as inclusive as possible, making sure that the experience of all colleagues is in line with my experience, and we haven't closed that gap at the moment. But one of the ways we're doing is heavily investing time and support into our well-established networks.

“The third thing we're focusing on is our response to the cost-of-living. We know that people are struggling. I don't think we should ever assume that we know what is happening in someone's personal life. We have been, I think, moving beyond the boundaries of just being an employer at Leicester hospitals, focusing on providing discounted food, free food for people's children, discounting transport, working with local providers.

“We've been handing out vouchers for clothing for children this winter. And then also we found out that 14% of our electrical bills goes on washing and drying your clothes. So, we've been offering people the opportunities for free to wash and dry their clothes on our hospitals. It's only a small step, but I think it's a really important step.

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“Then the final thing is, and I think possibly Leicester's in an unusual position from this, which I'm very embarrassed and ashamed to admit, but for a range of historical reasons, we have been unable to pay our colleagues consistently and accurately on time, and we have to resolve that. People are coming to work and working their socks off, and if we're not paying them on time, we're doing them a disservice. So, we're putting a huge amount of effort into all of our payroll functions and our transactional HR Teams to make sure that people get paid for the work that they do.

“I do believe 13 months into it, there is evidence that supports it and it's beginning to feel like a different organisation, we have to make it as easy as possible for people to do their job and as easy as possible for people to do the right thing. And I think some of the things that I've touched on cut through that.”

The NHS is facing a deepening recruitment crisis, with more than 100,000 posts unfilled. Reflecting on attempts to fill staffing gaps, Mr Mitchell said:

“I think international recruitment has a really important role in overall recruitment and retention. I think it has to be done ethically. The last thing we want to be doing is to have a detrimental impact on any other country because we're importing doctors and nurses, other health care professionals into the NHS.

“At Leicester, we've just signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the British Association of Physicians of an Indian Origin and their sister organisation, British Indian Nurses Association, which is for the nurses, and they are an ethical mechanism of supporting doctors and nurses who have trained in India and in the subcontinent to come and work in Leicester. We have to make them feel as welcome and as included as possible. And that isn't always the case.

“We certainly want to establish Leicester the place that I would like to go and work. There's a lot of work we need to do before that, but we also want to engage far more effectively with our local communities. I don't think Leicester is particularly effective at engaging with its local communities.

“By and large, the way that we recruit is using NHS jobs. Well, if you're not a doctor or nurse or one of the other people that I've listed and you're looking for work across a whole range of different professions, you're probably not going to go on to NHS jobs or think about or wonder what the jobs that are available in the Royal Infirmary.

“We have been setting up a micro site. We're going back to High Street recruitment. We're going to have a presence on the High Street enabling our communities to come in and we will explain to them the rich varieties of jobs that we have in the organisation. Actually, why working in the NHS can be a job for life.”

Hosted by healthcare expert Suhail Mirza, the podcast episode featuring Richard Mitchell is available now alongside previous episodes in the series on various platforms including YouTube, Apple, Spotify and the Newcross Healthcare website.

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