NHS boss reveals how focus on staff wellbeing helped to turn around failing hospital

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A senior manager at a previously failing hospital has outlined how a sharp focus on staff wellbeing helped to transform its fortunes.

Laura Skaife-Knight, Deputy Chief Executive Officer at Queen Elizabeth Hospital, King's Lynn Foundation Trust, says the facility has gone from being 'the worst performing hospital in the country' to having a 'bright future' in just four years.

Speaking to Newcross Healthcare's Voices of Care podcast, Laura spoke about how important measures to improve staff wellness had been integral to the turnaround of the Norfolk hospital, which recently pulled itself out of special measures.

These include encouraging staff to speak internally about any problems they were facing, free parking, cheaper meals and giving all staff an extra day off in which to focus on their wellbeing.

Laura, who is due to take over as the chief executive of NHS Orkney, in Scotland, in April, also spoke about the general pressures facing the NHS currently, describing it as a 'perfect storm' and calling for an end to 'short-term fixes' to solve the ongoing problems the sector faces.

Commenting on the turnaround at the Norfolk hospital, she said: "If we turn the clock back three or four years ago, this hospital was quite literally the worst performing hospital in the country. It was considered a basket case and it was top of the agenda in terms of the national top of the office, in terms of being on the hit list, if you like. And that's not a good place to be.

"We were bottom of the table on every indicator. The good news was the only way is up. So that presents real opportunities. But actually, at the heart of our challenge was working with an organisation and a workforce that was battered and bruised and, in some cases, had actually given up.

"We had a very clear formula. At the heart of that was being absolutely clear on our expectations and focus on our values. And quite simply, they are kindness, wellness and fairness and living our values and bringing our values to life in everything we do. And calling out poor behaviour.

"The vast majority of speak up concerns went direct to the CQC because staff feared speaking up internally. There was real fear of detriment. And actually, staff simply bypassed line managers and went straight outside of the organisation. So, we've changed that. We've turned that around."

On the subject of improving the well-being of staff, Laura said: "If staff are to be at their best for patients, we have to absolutely make sure we invest in our staff. And we've done that by investing very significantly in our health and wellbeing program. We have a class-leading clinical psychology team who work both individually, with our staff, where they have concerns and need support but with teams.

"All of our policies are updated to have a really big focus on mindfulness. Encouraging staff to take time out, to have their breaks, to have health MOTs and recently we agreed with all of our workforce to give every member of staff a wellness day this year.

"It also includes free car parking, half price gym membership, which has been hugely successful and well received by our workforce, discounted meals, recognising the cost-of-living crisis and the challenges."

Laura said that other measures to help turnaround the Trust had included a new School of Nursing, in partnership with West Norfolk Borough Council and College of West Anglia, and making the culture more inclusive to all through new staff networks and multi-faith rooms.

On her departure and new role she said: "I'm hugely excited, but sad to be leaving the Queen Elizabeth Hospital where I've had the most memorable three plus years. And I think here with Team QEH have achieved some amazing things. I know the future is bright here, but equally I'm looking forward to my next challenge and at my first chief executive post at NHS Orkney."

Commenting on the pressures impacting the NHS as a whole, she added: "What we're seeing now effectively is the perfect storm. Over 100,000 vacancies in the NHS. The pressures are unrelenting, I

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think it's fair to say. And like nothing I've seen in my career over the last 20 years, both in terms of pressures on the front door and urgent and emergency care and of course the very significant challenge we have across the NHS of addressing the elective backlog that has built through COVID.

“Coupled with the fact that quite honestly, our staff are tired, we're seeing more burnout and we know as a result of that morale has taken a big hit and staff sickness itself has had an impact and, of course, we know when we see increases in sickness, we have to rely therefore more on agency staff and that comes with an added financial challenge and burden, in addition to the growing demand on our services.

“I think we have to understand the true impact of COVID coming to the fore. And quite honestly, people are choosing, we know, to leave the NHS and I think COVID has made many of us think differently about our priorities in life and what we want in terms of work-life balance and more flexibility. But I think when you boil this all down, we need to stop applying short-term fixes to what is clearly a longer-term problem.”

Hosted by healthcare expert Suhail Mirza, the podcast episode featuring Laura Scaife-Knight is available now alongside previous episodes in the Voices of Care series on various platforms including You Tube, Apple, Spotify and the Newcross Healthcare website.

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