

Our NHS follies and conundrums. Are you distressed? Perplexed?

Recent history has much to teach us

If you do not change direction, you may end up where you are headed

– Lao-Tzu, 6th C BC

Our NHS work-culture is increasingly like an unhappy family. Few feel safe, nourished, appreciated or valued; many flinch from threat or blame. Most describe their milieu as restive and fractious or weary and dispirited. Yet this is often disguised by a false-bright public persona: behind closed doors our interchanges are often very different.

How do we understand such degradation of our ideals? True to our frustrated family-like culture we react more than we understand. We find scapegoats, we blame: politicians, other colleagues, managers, feeble funding, exploitive contracts, irrational patients... Our choice of culpability can always find evidence. The favourite battlegrounds usually settle around apportioning of money and power.

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I have long thought that our emerging unhappy family, and the consequent heroes and villains we discover or construct, are all symptoms and signs of underlying cultural forces – our increasingly industrialised and commodified way of life. *Technototalitarianism*¹ is a term that serves to capture some of these processes.

So, for many years I have listened to many discussions, attended many meetings and read many tracts – all attempting to define for us the ‘real problem’. Yet none enlightened me nearly as much as watching a seemingly peripherally relevant recent documentary film: *Citizen Jane: Battle for the City*.² Recalling the coerced evolution of many of our modernised cities in the last seven decades has a disturbing, yet instructive, resemblance to what is

clearly emerging in our NHS healthcare. The alienating gigantism of our city-scapes has been a premonition for the corporatized human-scapes of our healthcare. But we need to be open to history and social psychology to see the pattern.

This film – for me a kind of ninety-minute epiphany – galvanised my enquiry and much further thought. And then the attached article *Déjà Vu: Twenty-first century healthcare reforms and post-war urban renewal*. The material is fascinating: I hope it justifies the length of writing.

Too tired for a challenging read? Then try the film first.

The ax forgets, the tree remembers.

– African Proverb

Best wishes

David Zigmond

References

1. Zigmond, David (2005) 'Edward: Shot in his own interest. Technototalitarianism and the fragility of the therapeutic dance', *Journal of Holistic Healthcare*. Vol 2, Issue 4
2. *Citizen Jane: Battle for the City*. Directed by Matt Trynauer. Altimeter Films, 2016