

Life of contrasts

Paula Vasco-Knight

When I go to work every day - I try to bring with me and hold on to the experience and feelings I had when I was sitting next to my mother in intensive care

Published on

16 Sep 2013

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The following blog post comes from Paula Vasco-Knight's speech in response to the award of an Honorary Degree by Exeter University on the 19th July 2013. Paula was also awarded the [NHS award for Inspiration](#) at the NHS Leadership Recognition Awards 2012.



A few weeks ago, I was sitting by my mother's bedside in a hospital in Liverpool. She was very ill and, for a while, I didn't know whether she was going to pull through (she did I am very pleased to say).

Picture the scene: the hospital bed, the pool of light, the bleeping electronic machines, the hushed voices, the huge arrays of monitoring equipment contrasting with the small, vulnerable woman lying in a bed with a myriad of tubes invading her body.

This small vulnerable woman is not normally small or vulnerable. She is the larger than life woman, who, in my childhood and; as my life has progressed, has been full of health, life and energy – loving and supporting me through life's triumphs and sometimes life's disasters too.

I sat by her bed for 5 days. It gave me time to reflect on what is important to me in my own life. When I was growing up in the 1960s and '70s; people like me were not meant to

end up standing on a platform receiving an award. I am just a mixed race, working class girl from Liverpool.

People like me were not meant to go to University either – and working until the early hours in KFC from the age of 13 was probably not the best preparation for an academic life in any case.

I joined the NHS as a pupil nurse which, in the 1980s was the route for those deemed to be non-academic and whose careers would be limited accordingly. But I broke the mould. When I saw something that was wrong on my ward or in the emergency department I wanted to sort it out, I wanted to take charge – let's face it – frankly, I was bossy!

As I went on to become a registered nurse, then an A&E sister, eventually a director of nursing, deputy chief executive and then a chief executive in my own right I did encounter prejudice. Other people also thought that I didn't belong.

When being appointed into one very senior job the feedback from the mainly white, male, senior professionals was that I was simply "too different".

I'll leave it to your imagination to decide exactly what that meant. But the NHS, celebrating its 65th birthday this year has, in reality, provided wonderful opportunities – probably more than any other British institution – for people from black and ethnic minority backgrounds to reach their potential. And yes, the NHS has itself depended on the loyalty and dedicated service of these same people.

It has also been an excellent route for people – women in particular – from socially disadvantaged backgrounds to get a degree level education from where, as I hope you will all find out, the possibilities are endless.

So imagine my delight when two years ago I was asked to become the national lead in the NHS for equality and diversity.

The NHS employs a million people, it is the UK's biggest organisation, and therefore its potential to do great things, in valuing the diversity of its workforce and making sure that its workforce represents the diversity of the communities it serves, is phenomenal. It is an issue I am absolutely passionate about.

It is therefore both a great honour and a huge responsibility to be asked to take the lead on making sure that the NHS lives up to its potential in this way. And I recognise it has further to go. But let's go back to my mother lying in her intensive care bed.

What were my fears? What were my concerns? What did I feel she needed from the NHS?

Well first, of course, I wanted the hospital to provide clinically effective, competent care. I felt I should be able to take it for granted that the clinical staff caring for her were properly trained, qualified and up to date. Knowledge, expertise and learning; and then applying it – the stuff of the partnership between the NHS and universities are crucial. And have helped drive innovation leading to great improvements for patients.

But just as importantly, she needed her care to show humanity; to be kind and to be compassionate. As I say, for me – and I am sure for her too – kindness and compassion was as important as technical competence.

Headlines about the NHS in recent months have led all of us in positions of leadership and authority to reflect. To question our approach and to ask questions about the fundamental values of the service, which we love, and in which we work.

For me – when I go to work every day – I try to bring with me and hold on to the experience and feelings I had when I was sitting next to my mother in intensive care – the feelings of a daughter.

My job as the leader of around 4,500 people in my organisation, and of a million people across the NHS, is to lead them and to inspire them to offer the sort of care that I so desperately wanted for my Mum and for every patient who we serve every day – every patient. Competent, clinically excellent care with kindness and compassion.

So I would like to leave you with some thoughts based on how I have tried to live my professional and personal life.

Be true to your values. Whatever your future holds – whether it is in the NHS, in other parts of the public sector, in the voluntary or in the private sector – be clear about what is important to you. Never forget your values. For me there are three values, which are precious.

First

Value and respect the people around you. I am here today not because of my own qualities – but because of the recognition that has been given to me based on the hard work and dedication of the people with whom I am privileged to work with in the NHS – day in day out.

Never forget the value of the people around you no matter the pinnacles of success you reach in your own careers. Remember you can't do it without the support of others.

Second

Value difference in this increasingly diverse nation and world of ours. The people who said I was “too different” when I was being interviewed for a senior job, soon realised that I was indeed different – proudly and unrepentantly different. But I think they came to realise that my difference was not a problem – it was an opportunity to see our organisation differently and to approach leadership in a different way too.

I am proud of being the mixed race, working class “scally” who made it good – but I want that for others too. And I urge you to support me in this – now and in the future.

Third and finally

The most important thing you can bring to work with you is your common humanity – your kindness and compassion. Think of your patients or your customers or your colleagues as if they might be members of your own family. What would you want for them and how would you wish them to be treated?

I live these values in my everyday life and so far they have served me well.