

Lead from the front

Lynn Anderson, Director of The Sherpa Way, outlines the difficulties of achieving a truly inclusive NHS...

Equality featured heavily in the headlines in 2007. We said goodbye to the three Commissions promoting and policing in the worlds of disability, gender and race equality, and said a brief hello to the Commission for Equality and Human Rights (CEHR). We didn't even get a chance to say 'how are you doing?' before the transformation from the widely recognisable CEHR to the difficult to say and near impossible to find EHRC (Equality and Human Rights Commission).

Of course brand is important, and the CEHR was not without its critics before it came into being. A move to EHRC may be the way that this organisation is able to align its internal and external values, ensuring clarity for all. Only time will tell, but I for one would like to know more about the role and route map of the new kid on the block. Is it a partner guiding us through change? Or perhaps an aloof accountability watchdog, ready to name and shame?

Trevor Phillips recently gave us a hint of the direction of travel. As Chair of the EHRC, he is keen to see the Commission push to put equality officers onto the boards of business, as well as seeking publication of diversity data in their annual reports. Perhaps this positions the EHRC as the Diversity Dictator? A body that not only lays down the law on what must be achieved but also stipulates which path to follow on the way forward.

This, of course, is not a million miles from the requirements of the public duties for disability, gender and race. As a result of these, NHS organisations and others in the public sector support a massive industry involved in the creation of equality schemes and the delivery of the obligatory diversity training day.

However, despite this non-stop flurry of activity and the direction provided by the previous Commissions, progress remains patchy, with the journey only just started in many places.

Perhaps the NHS would benefit from listening to the EHRC proposals for the business world. Would a dedicated diversity champion on the board of each NHS organisation deliver the difference? Or would this continue to marginalise the issue and unintentionally allow others to dodge their responsibilities?

Good governance is imperative if the NHS is to become truly inclusive but I believe will not be achieved solely through the creation of a new role at the board or an 'add on' to the portfolio of an executive director.

When it comes to equality, good governance starts when every appointment round for non-executives and senior managers attracts not only a broad range of people but also requires candidates to demonstrate a track record in promoting equality.

Without real understanding and support at the top, then the EHRC is right; those who need to see change happen will not.

If the NHS is to become truly inclusive, it needs to commit itself to go beyond ticking boxes; it has to stay clear of tokenistic targets and mistaking representation for understanding. It must ask for help and learn from others but most of all, it has to have the confidence to simply 'do'.

To enable better progress in the NHS, the EHRC must decide its travel policy. Will it guide, will it help out with necessary repairs, but most of all, will it only issue tickets when the speed of the journey is dangerously slow, and not when the car simply takes a wrong turn?

It is for the EHRC to provide the necessary maps and ensure we all know the destination, but dictating the route and the mode of transport is a step too far.

Let 2008 be the year when the NHS resolves to make equality a reality with the help of a cohesive Commission committed to change and not column inches.

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