The need to build strong relationships for better integration

Tomas Morel

Lindsay Leg Club Foundation Trustee, healthcare policy, public affairs, and communications consultant.

The term 'integrated care' has become ubiquitous in the NHS. Huge system reforms have been implemented around it, and gargantuan resources allocated to promote its success, all in a bid to improve health outcomes, tackle inequalities and address issues in access to care.

It has been over a year since integrated care systems (ICS) have been officially brought online (NHS England, 2023). From an external perspective, much of the attention has been placed on the budget issues. In the background, volumes of work are taking shape to bring teams closer together and silos.

At the heart of these noble goals lie some fundamental truths. Improvements will be driven by innovation and innovation requires improving clinical knowledge and driving best practice. Programmes such as the National Wound Care Strategy Programme (2023) support teams across England to achieve these goals. The clinical community has been hugely receptive of these recommendations, the wider health ecosystem lags behind.

For almost a decade now, I have worked with clinical professionals to support innovation and improve services. A recurring question at the start of any project is, 'What is your relationship with your commissioner like?' It would be fair to say that the answers can vary significantly. Yet, with the advent of ICSs, there has never been a better time to engage and build these relationships.

Where to start? Integrated care boards (ICBs)—organisations that sits within an ICS and manage budgets—would be my first suggestion. Each ICB should have a Chief Nurse appointed, providing you and any other innovation-hungry colleagues, an entry point to build these relationships. The Queen's Nursing Institute (2023) has also created a Chief Nurse Network in collaboration with NHS Confederation, which met for the first time earlier this year.

At a recent conference, I had the pleasure of listening to the experience of one chief nurse who was supportive of the wound care reforms proposed. She gently challenged the room to answer the question, 'How many people here know their commissioner?'. Few hands were raised, and with them, the feeling of collective clarity gripped the room. This reality must change if we are to succeed in reforming wound care.

We must take advantage of every opportunity to help coordinate our engagement. This past September, the Annual Leg Club Conference in Worcestershire brought together wound care leaders to discuss these and many other issues. Conversations placed focus on how to build allies and partnerships, both locally and nationally. It was clearly recognised that the opportunity to engage is now – taking examples of national achievements such as the lower limb community's Commissioning for Quality and Innovation renewal for 2023/24.

Can it be done? Absolutely. Places such as Manchester and East London have seen proactive engagement between clinical and commissioning stakeholders supporting change. The time is now for the community sector to find and build championship spanning the 42 ICS geographies. CWC

National Woundcare Strategy Programme. About the programme. 2023. https://www.nationalwoundcarestrategy.net/about-the-nwcsp/ (accessed 13 November 2023)

NHS England. Integrated care systems. 2023. https://www.england.nhs.uk/integratedcare/ (accessed 13 November 2023)

Queen's Nursing Institute. ICB Chief nurse network. 2023. https://qni.org.uk/explore-qni/icb-chief-nurse-network/ (accessed 13 November 2023)

Call for Papers

BRITISH JOURNAL OF COMMUNITY NURSING

The *British Journal of Community Nursing* seeks manuscripts on topics such as: nutrition, dermatology, incontinence, diabetes, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, stoma care, lymphoedema, chronic oedema, oral health, wound care, intermittent self-catheterisation, infection control and assessment skills.

To discuss your ideas, contact: bjcn@markallengroup.com

Guidelines for authors are available from our website at: www.magonlinelibrary.com/page/authors/submissions

© 2023 MA Healthcare Ltd