

Selflessness



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Jaco Marais: Hello and welcome to the Public Good podcast. Today we are discussing the Nolan principle of selflessness. I'm joined here today by Caroline Alexander, CBE Chief Nursing Officer at Barts Health NHS Trust. Welcome, Caroline.

Caroline Alexander: Hi.

Jaco Marais: And we're also joined by Simon Hall. Simon, welcome. He's got 34 years' experience in the NHS. So, I'm joined here today by two people who really sort of embody selflessness. Currently, Simon's working with the Good Governance Institute on secondment from the NHS as a principal consultant on system strategy.

So selflessness...who's selfless? Can we afford to be selfless? Are we expecting the right people to be selfless? And is it too much to expect



people to be selfless in a hyper-individualistic culture such as ours? I'm Jaco Marais. I am your host and I think you'll want to listen to this.

Caroline, can you be a good nurse if you're not selfless?

Caroline Alexander: I think it would be useful just to spend a little bit of time thinking about what the definition of selfless is. Because I think that's why sometimes my comprehension or misapprehensions come into it all. So one of the things I did in preparing today was just go through some of the definitions and I thought that might be a good way into that question.

And I looked at a range. First of all, the dictionary definition. So it's 'concerned more with the needs and wishes of others than those of one's own'. The Nolan principle of selflessness is to 'act solely in the public interest and not in order to gain financial or other benefits for themselves'. I also looked at the Army, because I think there's a very interesting concept of selflessness there. And they talk about 'selfless commitment and the needs of the team always come before your own needs. Soldiers are part of something bigger and must commit to it'. And then I reflected also what selflessness and nursing, because, you know, there are different ways of looking at it. I looked at some definitions for nursing. *Healthy Healing, The Sacred Heart of Nursing* describes selflessness in nursing as dedication to their patients. 'They take seriously the role they play in being entrusted with the health and care of each patient. They consider their task to be a sacred trust, to protect and care for patients they don't know and perhaps will never see again.'

And my sense is that you can't be a nurse unless you're selfless because it is at the heart of nursing. Every nurse is selfless by nature, and if you read the code of conduct for nurses, it articulates that nurses are selfless by nature because we're trusted with very vulnerable people. And as a result of that, you have to put those people's rights and their support first and yours second. So it fits with the nursing profession through and through.

Jaco Marais: Wow. That really is a selfless definition of selflessness. Are nurses exploited for being selfless?

Caroline Alexander: We work in a world where nursing doesn't live in isolation and in terms of being taken for granted, I think there are assumptions made that if there's a pressure somewhere, that the nurse will always stay and will always cover. And they will. That's just the nature.

Now, that's okay in exceptional circumstances. We all know in exceptional circumstances that you would stay and support people. The challenge now is we are not in exceptional circumstances. The pressures on the workforce are so great that that selflessness could be abused by people, you know, people having to stay on or work twice as hard to do the same thing. And that is a real pressure being put on our staff.

People will always go above and beyond as far as they can. It's their nature. And that has a massive toll on individuals, whether it's in burnout or it's in relations at home because they're working so hard.

And in the NHS as leaders we work very, very



hard to minimise that. We'll never be able to resolve that entirely. But we have an absolute moral obligation to minimise that risk for first staff.

Jaco Marais: Is it becoming harder to attract nurses, do you think, from a culture that perhaps doesn't value selflessness as much?

Caroline Alexander: If you go back to the principle of why people go into nursing, I think it's a real value thing. If you go into nursing, it's because you care about others. And I think in society, there are lots and lots of people who care about others. What is different is the level that they will accept when those boundaries are broken.

I think my generation and my mum's generation all just did what we were told. You just got on with it and you did it. If you had to stay late, you stayed late. The new generation of nurses are more empowered to say enough is enough and actually will champion patients in a different way than my generation might have, by putting their hand up and saying enough is enough and forcing others to do more for them.

There are people still going into nursing. Our job is to keep them and make the world as flexible as possible given that they are a different group of people than the generations that have gone before.

Simon Hall: I think that's right, Caroline. I think one of the issues, though, is that we see that general sort of selflessness across the NHS. It's absolutely personified in nursing, I give you that, but when I look at the issues affecting, say, general practice and you look at all the

staff of general practice who frankly have been on their knees for a long time, trying their best to serve patients when actually the narrative is saying, 'Oh, aren't these people terrible? You're not able to get an appointment?' Well, you know, there's only so much you can do with the resources and the staff you're able to get. I think it's been very hard during the pandemic when people worked above and beyond all the time to keep that going.

I think the same applies to all types of clinical and in fact even managerial professions in the NHS, because it's not as if managers haven't gone above and beyond too. One of the things that I thought was amazing during the vaccine programme, for example, when the NHS excelled and everyone pulled together, was that actually a lot of that was led by pharmacists.

On your point, Caroline, about the generational differences, I'm the same generation as you and you're right. There is a certain way where you work and do what you do, and you go on the Christmas rota or whatever, because you just do. But actually, younger staff – and I'm not saying they're wrong, I actually suspect they're right for self-preservation factors – but they don't quite have that same view of their career, that sort of altruism in quite the same way. But they do have more advocacy for the patients and the people they're serving, but they also perhaps see their career differently.

Caroline and I have known each other



quite a long time. We've been in NHS positions for over 30 years. I don't think younger people see their careers as being 30 years in the same place. So how do we think about that in the context of selflessness and how people are coming in to careers in places like the NHS, particularly in nursing? Because I think it is going to be slightly different going forward.

Jaco Marais: Simon's worked as a transformation director in the north east London NHS and led a COVID vaccination programme for an integrated care system, delivering 3.6 million jabs to local people. So I think he knows a little bit about this. I think north east London has changed quite a lot. Is it more difficult to have a vocation and go into a career that requires so much personal sacrifice when perhaps you don't have as much support from your family or from your community to do that?

Simon Hall: I think it probably is, but there are a number of factors at play here. Places like north east London attract people to work in them who have greater vocation. People want to work in places like north east London because they are really committed to tackling things like health inequalities. So actually I think places like north east London will continue to get really high-quality staff because people want to make a difference and so many people are committed to that health inequalities agenda and to really thinking about how services and just the way everything is run can be done differently to meet the needs of newer populations.

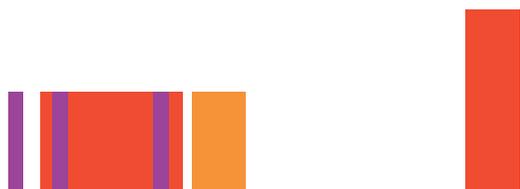
So I think a place like north east London, while it's a huge challenge to work there, is also incredibly interesting. And you get more value from it as a person who is selfless and exemplifies a lot of those values. All of my

staff working on the vaccine programme – and there were lots of them in all parts of the system – absolutely went above and beyond. And the consistent thing they said was, you know, they want to particularly make a difference for the population in north east London because they are among the most disadvantaged in the whole country.

But you also see it in some of the programmes that we've been running over many years. I got involved in working in the health service through being a volunteer in the early days of the HIV and AIDS crisis. We did that not because we were just wanting to give our time. We did that because our friends were all dying. We wanted to make a difference. And no one else was taking any notice of us – apart from some fabulous nurses, it has to be said, and some exceptional doctors.

So, you know, people get into things like the health service through different means. We were able to attract people into the health service in north east London through their involvement in the vaccination programme. We had loads of volunteers. People wanted to help. You know, the great British people made a huge difference. We've tried to get those people to get much more involved in getting careers in the NHS going forward. And there's the other end of the spectrum too: retired people will also probably be doing things to support the NHS. That's certainly what I'm looking to do in the fullness of time.

Jaco Marais: Selflessness is never going to be profitable, is it, by definition? And so it's difficult to expect from the media to promote selflessness. Could you tell us some of the stories of selfless behaviour that you've seen in





the community – Simon mentioned during the HIV pandemic the volunteers helping – and how can we support our community and be selfless and give selflessly without it being a media storm?

Caroline Alexander: When you talk about community, are you meaning in the breadth of things or what do you mean by community?

Jaco Marais: Well, during the pandemic, the best that the community and the people out in the street could do was to bang pots and clap for the NHS. It just felt so wholly inadequate, and it was such a difficult pandemic where you couldn't actually go and touch people, visit people. So what I'm really looking for is a really good news story – a heart-warming story of people being selfless in the community, especially now that we're opening up and we can see each other again.

Caroline Alexander: One of the things that we often don't get right in the NHS is how we engage with our local communities to design the best type of care possible. And I think one of the things that really came out for us within Bart's Health in particular, and the NHS more broadly, was that we created a different dynamic with our local populations, because you can't get out to everywhere and meet people and do things and it limits the amount of engagement that can happen.

We put in place a range of sessions to get the faith groups and different community groups to help us understand the needs of our population better so that we could design our care better and respond better. Because in the pandemic it was terrifying for people not being able to see their families when they were in hospital.



So we went out and listened to the elders and others in the communities to find out how we could communicate more effectively. To me, that's a great thing that's come out of the pandemic in terms of us being much more part of our local community and delivering care on behalf of our community.

That, to me, is a selfless act. All of these people have given up their time to enable us to be better at doing what we need to do for their population. And I am hugely grateful to the people who've done that. And some people have had to step above the parapet on that.

For example, when you go back to vaccination, we know about the national outcry around black Asian minority ethnic staff taking the vaccine. We had lots of people in the local population putting their head above the parapet and saying, 'Please do it. I'll be a role model'. We've had staff who've gone against their cultural beliefs and their spiritual beliefs to do what they believe is the right thing for patients.

That is selfless, because they've put themselves in harm's way in a societal sense to do the right thing for patients and the community. And that is a very hard price to pay.

Jaco Marais: We've established that the British people are indeed a selfless culture, no matter what we're made to believe, and it's no surprise that nurses are selfless, and we should really thank them for that. The Nolan principle defines selflessness as 'holders of public office should

act solely in terms of the public interest'. Are our leaders selfless? Have they become less selfless? Should they become more selfless?

Caroline Alexander: Very interesting question. Earlier in the week, we had a session where the Bart's Health board and the Havering and Redbridge Trust board came together, along with the chief executive and chair of the integrated care board, for a discussion. And it was interesting, if you take that thing about the Nolan principle being about public interest, and you look at the new world of integrated care boards and how we're working as a system.

The whole thing about integrated care is about the collective needs of the population. We have historically in the NHS been very much about organisational boundaries, commissioner/provider, and in a sense it's been less selfless in the past because it was about organisations up against each other. And if you think about the principles of an integrated commissioning system there's a commitment to collaborate across organisational boundaries and it's actually in legislation, that is the commitment and the expectation.

I would say that the world is moving towards more selflessness because it's about doing better for the total and for the greater good rather than what my organisation requires. Now, that's not as easy as it sounds. The principle is great, but you've got to think about behaviours, you've got to think about egos, you've got to understand the pressures of

people working within organisations and who they're working to.

But if you can get the leaders to come together, you can get that level of trust, you can make the levers work so that people can do this as simply as possible. Then I think if there's ever a time in the NHS, this is the time, on a sort of a regional footprint or a sector footprint, to really start practising what we preach around selflessness and doing right by populations.

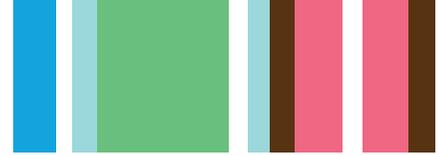
Simon Hall: I agree, Caroline. I think it's something about organisational selflessness you were describing, which is what the new integrated care systems are meant to embody. So, the end of that contracting and competitive regime between trusts and the NHS... you know, while it served us well in some respects it wasn't about population health, so that moved population health and the emphasis is great.

And I think if we think about our leaders, they need to exemplify that more. I very much welcome greater involvement, particularly with local government and local government leaders, and they've got lots of ways they can bring local people with them as well. I won't comment on national leaders, but I think locally – and I've seen this in the work I've recently been doing with GGI – around the country local leaders are really coming together to exemplify this organisational selflessness that will come from integrated care.

Jaco Marais: We are gearing up to reward this year's Rising Star Nursing Award winner. Could you tell us more about that?

Caroline Alexander: Julie Bolus is the person the Rising Star Award is in honour of. And Julie was probably one of the most selfless people you can imagine. So it's lovely that the Good Governance Institute has continued to celebrate her because she was an absolute role model and very sadly died a couple of years ago, very suddenly.

But she epitomised the thing about courage – being willing to say difficult things to people who didn't want to hear them, suffering sometimes as a result of doing the right thing, but



always proudly fighting for the right cause. She was also selfless in the support she gave to colleagues and peers, always putting a huge amount of time every week into coaching and supporting the next generation of leaders to help them to be special.

And she was someone who had the population's needs at heart. And how to deliver care in a community way. And all the things Simon talked about earlier about designing systems that are personal and do right by people and not about organisations. So she left a huge heritage and it's great that the Rising Star continues, and I look forward to seeing who gets it this year.

Jaco Marais: Yes, we miss Julie. She was an associate of CGI and...

Caroline Alexander: Unique.

Jaco Marais: This award goes to someone who demonstrates passion, care and leadership and I think an honour of Julie Bolus's should also really recognise someone with a good sense of humour.

Caroline Alexander: Yeah. I've got some very funny stories from her...

Jaco Marais: How does a nurse demonstrate leadership?

Caroline Alexander: Wow. Well, I think there's lots and lots of different ways nurses can demonstrate leadership. One of the things to me is about being courageous as a leader. One of the things when I reflect on being a leader is you have to sometimes do things that can put you at personal risk, not in a physical sense, but

from a psychological safety point of view, you might have to challenge decisions that people don't want to be challenged on because you want to do right.

So it's having the confidence to ask questions, to put proposals, compromise, etc. that is the art of good leadership because you can't have nursing over here and the bigger care system over here. As nurse leaders, we have got to be influential in the delivery of health care overall, as well as the way we manage and lead our staff.

Jaco Marais: So there you have it. The reward for selflessness is enduring love and respect.

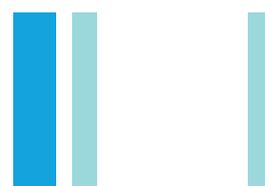
Caroline Alexander: Absolutely.

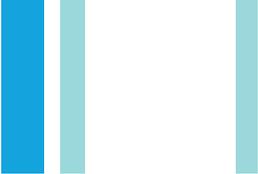
Jaco Marais: What's next? How do we lead people into the future?

Simon Hall: You empower, you don't get in the way. You empower them to do the right thing within the parameters that you've been given. But you don't tell them how to do it. You help, you discuss, you're always there if they've got a question. And you take the flak if they ever make a mistake – that's very important as a leader. What do you think, Caroline, in terms of your experience?

Caroline Alexander: My job is to support and empower hospitals to deliver in the best way possible - to unblock things to help do that.

Where I feel it's really hard is for our middle tier of managers, upwards of 8As and Bs, who are caught in the middle of this external pressure and they're still trying to do the right thing. How do we give them the headspace to lead, and do it in a personal, empowering way? The psychological pressure from both





leaders above and their staff to do the right thing – that’s when behaviours can be more challenging. And I think we need to invest, invest, invest in those tiers of leaders to enable them because that’s where the difference going forward will really be made.

If I was a practising clinical nurse now, I would love to be a Buurtzorg nurse – that is the heart of selfless nursing or care. And it’s also about being able to deliver. It’s not about health boundaries or social care boundaries. You do right by a patient by getting to know them – that might mean taking them to go and get tea in the evening or something like that. That is good, person-centred care and it epitomises selflessness at a local level.

But also their model of leading is that you have coaches, you are self-governing teams. We’re so far away in many organisations from actually being able to deliver that, but that’s when you get truly selfless, perfectly designed care because it is designed around the people we’re there to serve and the staff that serve.

And it just fills my heart with joy when I hear the stories of what they can deliver. I’d love to be able to translate that Buurtzorg concept into how you run a hospital.

Jaco Marais: The Buurtzorg care model really requires a lot of trust. It’s an act of faith. Why don’t we have this here in the UK?

Simon Hall: We do have quite a number of pilots and quite a lot of community trust teams have adopted it around the country. I know we had a go with the Sutton Foundation Trust in Tower Hamlets – it’s not quite the same as Buurtzorg, but nonetheless there are teams, that’s their role and that’s what they’re doing.

They’re based out there in the community with that empowerment. They’re doing it as well in the north west of England. I was in Bedfordshire the other week that they’re doing it there too. So there’s quite a lot of it.

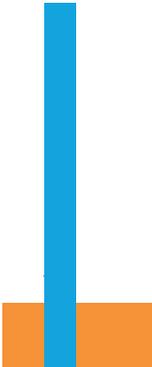
I think Caroline’s right, we need to think about how we translate that across into hospital services. But I think that the principles are absolutely there.

Jaco Marais: Is there a cost to selflessness?

Caroline Alexander: Well, I would say for individuals and for organisations potentially there is. There are examples where people have challenged corrupt behaviours or bad care and haven’t come out the other side very well because they haven’t been supported to do it. And so there is a real personal cost to people who have the courage to stand up to do the right thing.

I’ve had examples in my career where I have really gone out on a limb, and it is psychologically quite terrifying. I’ve made some decisions where I could have actually walked away from one job because I thought, I can’t work in this context anymore. And I’d just got a mortgage. But it was the right thing for me to do – not necessarily the right thing for everyone to do. But if you’re in the wrong environment, you know, there is a cost to it. If it goes against your values and it goes against your principles. Sometimes it’s better to get out than to stay.

But I think overall, you know, I get such a buzz out of doing what I do and the people I support, the difference I make and the time I spend learning from other people. It’s a privilege



more often than not to do what we do. And so selflessness is a great thing, but it can have a personal risk if you have to be courageous in a situation where you're challenging something, but it makes life much more psychologically safe in many ways.

Simon Hall: I agree. For me it's about being able to live with myself. I'm known for being someone who does tend to open my mouth a bit. But, you know, I wouldn't not say the right thing or do the right thing, but it does take some personal cost and I've seen that with my teams as well.

If we think about the vaccine programme, you know, people put so much extra energy into that and were exhausted. People were at breaking point or beyond. So I think what we need to do, as leaders, is to recognise in our teams and in ourselves and each other and be good at challenging each other.

Caroline Alexander: But one critical point is how as leaders we make sure that we stay at our best. For example, I've had a coach for many years. He knows me inside and out. During the pandemic, I had half an hour every week with him in the height of each of the peaks.

So I had a safe place to let go, park it all and move to the next thing. Because you were holding so much pressure and I needed to be able to decompress so that I could then be more creative and keep going because I knew I had that responsibility for my team. That sort of things doesn't come naturally to all leaders – being vulnerable. But you've got to understand that we are taking a lot on emotionally when we are doing these difficult jobs and you have to make sure that you do that.

Simon Hall: Absolutely. The importance of coaching and mentoring is absolutely critical. I don't think one can stress that enough. And it's really important that we continue to invest in that as organisations, to help and assist and support our leaders in that way. I look up to you, Caroline.

Jaco Marais: I'd be interested to hear what the listeners thought about today's discussion. What I think is that we can do more and better for less if we trusted people and if we valued the principle of selflessness more.

If you have any questions or comments, please don't hold back. Follow us on Twitter @GoodGovInst or send us an email advice@good-governance.org.uk.

Thank you very much to Caroline Alexander, who's been absolutely fantastic, and Simon too, thank you very much, especially for your anecdotes.

