

It's my job to ask

You might recall the campaign by pubs and clubs a while back to ask frisky teenagers just how old they were. Staff were given badges as part of Challenge 21 saying 'It's my job to ask'.

This was partly for young people's safety but also to protect the organisation from fines if they were found to have been supplying liquor to under-age drinkers

For a while I took to wearing one of these badges as a stimulus to NEDs when we met in boardrooms to encourage asking critical questions. The new RCPE Quality Governance programme has as its strap line 'asking the right questions'.

Way back in 2009, the Audit Commission produced a seminal paper *Taking it on trust*, which explained the critical duty for non-execs to challenge their colleagues and executives that what they said was true. This was not a challenge to their professional integrity but a fulfilment of their role to clarify that what was being said would actually happen.

This has never been more important than it is today, when we are expecting our NHS, public and privately

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run services to live up to public expectations that they will fulfil their duties to service users, staff and customer to keep them safe and improve their prospects for survival and wellbeing. To ask difficult questions, whether in parliament, the boardroom or in public forums, is a fundamental right and duty, not only for those asking the questions but for those required to answer them.

The NHS has largely learnt the lessons from Sir Leon Donaldson, that it's alright to say I'm sorry when I get it wrong; politicians must learn this too. When challenged, senior executives who don't know the answer must have the confidence and humility to say: 'I don't know but I'll find out and get back to you'.

Scrutiny to improve and questions to test are not a challenge but a responsibility.

