



Putting Patients Last: How the NHS Keeps the Ten Commandments of Business Failure

James Gubb, Peter Davies

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In recent years, NHS reform in England has focused on stimulating competition between providers and increasing choice for patients. Many NHS organisations are now as much businesses as they are public bodies; if they fail to design services around patients and meet their needs, they should start to lose custom as well as incurring the wrath of government.

But just how good are they at satisfying their ‘customers’ – the patients? Could they, for example, survive in a genuine marketplace? In 2008 Donald R. Keough, the former president of the Coca-Cola Company, published *The Ten Commandments of Business Failure* in which he argued that, while success is hard to predict, businesses that fail share common characteristics: they stop taking risks; become inflexible; isolate themselves; assume infallibility; play the game close to the foul line; don’t take time to think; put their faith in outside consultants; love bureaucracy; send mixed messages; are afraid of the future; and lose their passion for work.

Far too many ‘businesses’ in the NHS are doing all of these things, with the results Keough described. His commandments focus on cultures that breed success which, when push comes to shove, enable businesses to focus on one end-goal: the customer – or in this case the patient. Without this culture, the NHS will continue to fail patients. Merely creating more autonomous organisations and giving them commercial incentives is not a solution. Across the NHS, a change in thinking is required. For now the NHS businesses remain enmeshed in state bureaucracy, inclined to dance to the tune of their shareholders – the government and Whitehall – rather than starting with what patients want and need. They must do all in their power to break the stranglehold of command-and-control structures, while government must stop interfering and let them.

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