



Communication in health and social care

Blaming culture or learning culture?

Commentary:

Patrick Ayre is a social worker who's been working in the field of child protection for thirty years. Patrick now lectures and works as a consultant, and chairs independent reviews into serious child abuse cases. Patrick describes how the climate is changing in social work. Already the NHS has seen the importance of a climate in which it's safer for staff to examine any mistakes. This is often referred to as a learning culture, as Patrick explains.

Patrick:

The notions of a learning culture and a learning organisation are a bit like mother's milk and apple pie, they're more or less universally accepted as being desirable, everyone endorses them and says they're working towards achieving them. If you look at the mission statement of virtually any social care organisation you'll find them listed there, but you have to ask yourself if they really go much farther than being pious hopes, how far are they realised in practice? The idea of a learning culture depends crucially on being able to put more emphasis on future improvement than on past blame, and the sad reality is that whatever their rhetoric most social care organisations are addicted to blame, and they're find it a very hard habit to break.

Commentary:

Patrick tells us how he thinks that people who work in the area of child protection can benefit can best learn from their mistakes.

Patrick:

People learn best from critical review of past events when they're not afraid, and they typically have two kinds of fear in this area of work. The first a very, very immediate one which is concerned with the possibility of actually losing your job or losing your reputation. It's a very real fear in the area of child protection because if you actually review what happens in these cases, whenever there's a serious child abuse inquiry, whenever there's been a tragedy and a public inquiry, the Director of Social Services always stands up in front of the media to explain why things went wrong. If you just ask yourself how often is that Director of Social Services the one who was in post when the tragedy actually happened. It's very, very seldom the same person. Normally the person's had to move on, they've retired because of ill health, or taken early retirement, or moved on to a consultancy post. The likelihood that your career's going to be seriously adversely affected by something that happens is a very serious one, and one that actually affects the way that people function in the child protection arena. The other fear people have is a slightly more subtle one, it's to do with a fear of losing self respect and self esteem. If you're confident in yourself and you're confident in the service you provide, and if that confidence is reflected in the way that people interact you, the people in other services that you work with day in, day out, then it's easy to take criticism, it's easier to look at yourself reflectively and consider whether you've done well, or could have done better. However, if you feel you live your life under constant scrutiny where any small mistake you make will be seized on and used against you, and you're much more likely to be resistant to change.

Commentary:

In the absence of the conditions necessary for people who work in the area of child protection to learn from their mistakes, what happens to communication and relationships?

Patrick:

The relentless scrutiny to which child protection services have been exposed over recent decades has really had quite a severe cumulative impact on the culture within which the

services operate. In particular I'd suggest that we've tended to create a climate of fear, a climate of blame, and a climate of mistrust. Child protection work feels a very professionally hazardous area of activity to be involved in, and people working in a dangerous environment tend to adopt one of two possible strategies. One strategy is to band together in a close-knit, supportive, closely-integrated group, and stick together through thick and thin, an army going to war might be a good example of that kind of strategy. The other strategy is every man for himself and the Devil take the hindmost, where everyone protects their own position, even when this might be to the detriment of the overall effort. The pressures in the child protection system make the second of those possibilities more likely, unfortunately. Workers and managers close to the front line have been made to feel a profound lack of trust in them, and working in this kind of environment is bound to make it increasingly difficult for them to trust each other. Effective child protection work depends crucially on services being truly joined up, effective communication and high levels of trust between the people who are engaged in the work.

Commentary:

The lack of a climate of trust has a specific impact on child protection, as Patrick describes.

Patrick:

In the field of child protection it's vitally important that we keep sight of what we're working towards, that we put the child's wellbeing at the centre of everything that we consider, that we're focusing our efforts entirely on producing good results for the child. It gets terribly complicated when half of our effort is taken up in protecting ourselves and protecting our own interests. I sometimes feel that the child protection system might be better characterised at times as a system protection system, and sometimes so much of the effort of those involved is expended in protecting their own positions and making sure they're not going to be open to criticism, rather than having the energy left over to concentrate on doing what's best for the child.

Commentary:

Are there further consequences of this fear and anxiety?

Patrick:

There's a feeling that our social workers, health visitors and teachers are being changed from being professionals, able to guide their own practice and make judgements about what's in the best interest of the children they work with, being converted into technicians who have to follow strict rules and guidance about how they do things. We don't have the feeling that we're able to allow them to exercise their own judgement and make their own decisions. Rather, we have to hold their hands and walk them through every step of what they're doing, and those of us who teach in this area have noticed the change that we see in the students that we're producing. We find that people are much less willing to make judgements. They're very good at collecting data but much less willing to interpret it than they have been. They don't trust themselves and the reason they don't trust themselves is because we as managers have told them we don't trust them.

Commentary:

Is there a way out of this?

Patrick:

For the child protection system to recover we really badly need to try to develop a culture of confidence. I'm not really talking here about a climate of smug, self satisfaction and complacency, but rather the idea that people who are working in the field of child protection might just be able to come into work every morning feeling that generally they're doing a good job, and that they're respected by their fellow citizens for what they're trying to achieve. When I think about it, it seems almost unimaginable that we're going to be able to achieve that any time very soon. It's not really such a strange notion. If we just look over the Channel at the way child welfare services are regarded in continental Europe, we find that the negative image that we've got of child protection in the United Kingdom just isn't reflected there.

Commentary:

Patrick suggests that there are wider political and historical reasons for the negative image of child protection in the UK.

Patrick:

On the continent they have a much more positive attitude to the state in general, the state seen as facilitating, enabling, the state helps people to achieve their full potential. In the United Kingdom we're much more dubious about state intervention. Social workers on continental Europe are generally assumed to be working in the best interests of the families and children that they work hand in hand with. It's not the same in the United Kingdom, they're generally seen to be working in opposition to the families that they're engaged with, and the law does nothing to help this. If you think about our adversarial legal system in the United Kingdom, that's a system that automatically puts one side against another, and the judges are there to decide who's right. Are there social services right when they ask for a care order? Are the family right in resisting that care order? They're in opposite camps right from the very beginning, right from the initiation of proceedings the social workers are on one side, the families are on another side. It doesn't happen in continental Europe. In continental Europe there's an inquisitorial system where the purpose of the judge is to find out the truth, they're not interested in just looking at evidence, they want to know what's going on in this case. Clearly, taking that adversarial element out of relationships is bound to affect the confidence and trust which parties feel in one another. Attempts have been made for a number of years to introduce a less adversarial system into child protection proceedings in this country, but they never really got anywhere. People may be familiar with the idea of a family court, which would be modelled very much on the continental system. In fact, we see this kind of system in operation in Scotland because the Scottish have the same kind of tradition in their legal arrangements that we see on the continent, but it's never worked south of the border. That kind of co-operation has never been introduced and it's difficult to work out why that might be.

Commentary:

It seems from Patrick's explanation that the institutional, cultural, political and legal reasons that sustain a culture of blame make it difficult to achieve a culture of trust and confidence. What does Patrick see as the way forward?

Patrick:

The trouble with trying to establish a culture of confidence is that if you wanted to achieve it, you wouldn't really want to be starting from here. Years of criticism and negativity have left an impression on the whole system which is going to be extremely hard to shift. However, it might actually help if all of those involved could start to acknowledge some of the realities involved. First, it's really important for us to recognise that we're never going to totally eradicate child abuse, otherwise we set ourselves up to fail. We've already led ourselves into a path that can lead us into difficulty by calling our system a child protection system. That actually implies that it is going to protect children. We don't call it a trying to protect children system. We actually imply in the title we give to the service that it is going to protect children, and however hard we work, however good a system we have, however well we work together, however effectively we co-operate with parents, we're never actually going to totally do away with child abuse. There will always be some parents who abuse their children. There always have been historically, and there always will be in the future. All we can do is hope to reduce the prevalence of it. If we make promises to do more than that, then society's going to say to us, look, you haven't delivered what you promised. So we have to recognise that there are going to be some failures. Human behaviour is essentially unpredictable and we can never hope to capture all the possibilities, however good our systems of assessment may be. The second thing we have to recognise is that the system that we have, for all its faults is, in fact, remarkably effective at preventing the most serious forms of abuse. Thirdly, the professional confidence and skills of those undertaking working the front line are currently being constantly eroded, not only by criticism in the media, but also by the ill considered actions of managers and ministers who are responsible for this area of work, who constantly send the negative messages instead of the positive ones that they require.

Commentary:

How does Patrick think that child protection could be reframed as success rather than failure?

Patrick:

We need to find a way of communicating the many routine, small successes of the system, rather than concentrating entirely on the occasional, though often spectacular, failings that it has. The focus on things that go wrong in child protection comes primarily from the interests of the media. The media aren't interested in the everyday reality of family life, they're not interested in small successes in a child being made slightly happier, a child being protected from emotional abuse, a child being protected from neglect, they're interested in death and disaster, their focus is on lurid, headline-grabbing cases. When people who don't know very much about child protection are interviewed by researchers who want to find out what they know about child protection, they'll tell you about sexual abuse, they'll tell you about children being killed by their parents, in fact they'll tell you about the exceptional cases, not about the rule. The rule is social workers, hundreds of social workers across the country working with thousands of families who are neglecting their children, who are finding it difficult to bring them up; they're only working with hundreds of cases involving cases of physical abuse and sexual abuse of the kind that hit the headlines. All we can try to do is develop a media strategy which involves making relationships with sections of the media not so concerned with news, with people concerned with the editorial elements in newspapers, not the front page, but people writing opinion pieces in the middle of the paper somewhere. And we can learn an awful lot from the way the police operate in this area. The police have a very effective strategy for drip feeding positive stories about their work to friends within the press. They cultivate relationships which allow them to get information across routinely about the good work they're doing in areas that people care about. The approach adopted by people working in child protection is completely different. It's a hands off approach. There's a fear of the media, there's a fear of getting engaged, the response is entirely reactive. You can only get a story about child abuse from a social services department if you push them really, really hard. They never volunteer information about the work that they're doing day by day to make children's lives happier. We really need to radically rethink the way this whole area is dealt with in order that we can start to get across some of the positive messages on a routine basis, rather than only dealing with exceptional events when things go wrong.

Commentary:

Despite all of the difficulties associated with working in a stressful area social care workers continue to work in child protection. Patrick explains why in his experience this is the case.

Patrick:

People working in the field of child protection have a genuine concern for making life better for children, that's why they're in the job, that's what they want to achieve. Most of the work done by social workers, health visitors, teachers, police officers working in the field of child protection, is both effective and successful. Most of their work is done day by day working with families and with children to improve the standards of parenting, to make life a little bit better, and to help parents understand their children's needs, to understand their emotional needs, to understand their physical needs, to help them to meet the children's developmental needs better. And they're doing this work week in, week out, gradually, gradually lifting the standards of parenting within families, gradually, gradually improving the quality of children's lives. It's not dramatic, it's never going to hit the headlines, it happens subtly over days, weeks, months, even years, and no-one sees it apart from the families actually involved in it, no-one sees it apart from the children who are benefiting from these kinds of services. It's a confidential service, it's not the kind of thing which is noised abroad. That's really where the greatest successes of the child protection system lie, in the routine improvement of standards, not in the prevention of death and tragedy.