VIEWPOINT CHANGE

Val Doonican rocks, but does nursing?

A chance encounter with the Cardigan King in the day room of her ward set Jane Warner thinking about the future of nursing. Confused? Then read on.

I discovered a dust-covered gem of a record in the day room of the ward where I used to work. Its presence might have passed unnoticed had I not been going through a stage of ‘reflective’ angst (quite similar to adolescence, but without having to spend so much time in the bathroom). I stared in wonder at the cover of Val Doonican Rocks... but Gently. What was this record’s title telling me? Could I apply its message more widely? And what was it doing there? As far as I was aware, it was not being used for rehabilitation, reminiscence or reality orientation.

No. The message that the sleeve of Val Doonican Rocks... but Gently brings to all spheres of nursing is that we seem to be very good initially at being dynamic and innovative but then we are halted in our tracks by constraints beyond our control. In other words, we are now encouraged to ‘rock’ but gently’.

Seduced nurses

How many nurses, for example, have been seduced into ‘working towards’ primary nursing, with all its perceived benefits, only to find months later that their ideals have been compromised in inverse proportion to the overspend in marker pens for the heads of their patients’ beds?

And quality assurance? I wonder how, on the one hand, staff are excited and committed to standard setting, yet on the other, many will explain that they are now ‘working towards’ completing a third, or possibly a fourth published standard.

Nowhere is the Val Doonican message so clear as in the field of promoting independence in elderly people. Few nurses will disagree that this is a worthy aim – until someone accidentally falls. In manager-speak, we are no longer ‘accountable’, we are ‘blameworthy’. The result: never likely to read it as the author cannot get it published. Why? It has been alleged that his work does not fit in with establishment views. In other words, he is expected to conform to accepted norms, to ‘rock, but gently’.

How does the Val Doonican approach to nursing management manifest itself? Simple. The gist of dynamic management appears to be that however desirable or necessary a goal is considered to be, the manager is not supposed to give vent to the autonomy that would allow things to ‘rock’, that is, get done with brisk efficiency.

Instead, managers have almost all become staunch advocates of a bottom-up approach. The essence of such a stance is to trick the manager’s hapless employees into believing that they have stumbled on an original idea (guess whose?) which they then try to bring to fruition following countless meetings.

In my experience, when nursing management ‘rocks, but gently’, it becomes possible for disabled patients’ meals to be left untouched, for staff to hover over a woman’s care plan while expressing uncertainty as to what she’s actually ‘in’ for, and for bath hoists to grow enough mould to keep shareholders in penicillin-manufacturing companies quaffing champagne for the remainder of their lives.

External constraints

If the ‘rocks, but gently’ principle is a valid one when applied to nursing, the question arises as to why this might have some foundation in truth. To use an analogy, nursing is obviously a more complex business than driving a car, but we often appear to halt at green traffic lights even if the road ahead is clear.

Why should this be so? I suspect a combination of reasons. There are the external constraints of working within a large, bureaucratic structure. Then there is the process of socialisation which exerts a powerful inducement to conform. There may also be an innate fear of risk-taking and of professional opprobrium if we are perceived as being too dynamic.

In conclusion, I have reflected long and hard about my day room encounter with the Cardigan King. If the aim of reflection is to foster new learning, I have succeeded. I may not have set the nursing world alight with my observations, but I can now knit cable pullovers, and I can also strum a mean E minor chord — on the piano, unfortunately, but it’s a start.

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