With some thrifty thinking, we could turn the tide on NHS waste

‘Ow! Ow!’ I thought, but kept my pain to myself. Sister in theatres had set the bar high when it came to handling instruments from our steam steriliser, claiming she had asbestos fingers.

The trouble was, she seemed to expect us all to be equally insensitive – or stoic – when it came to handling hot metal.

In those days, as little as possible was disposable when it came to hospital equipment. We had our own autoclave sterilising chambers (hence the throbbing finger-tips), and great vats of Milton solution to sterilise babies’ bottles. Even the mops we used to clean beds between patients were seeped in a disinfectant called Lysol, and used again and again.

Thrift was drummed into us as nursing students. Now, with so many items we use being disposable, it goes against the grain to throw away single-use forceps. Single-use anything, in fact, including our plastic single-use teaspoons which I clean carefully and put back into circulation.

‘The throwaway lifestyle is unsustainable – so what is the NHS doing about it?’

With the seas awash with non-biodegradable rubbish, the tide is turning. Landfill sites are heaving, and society is realising that the throwaway lifestyle is unsustainable. So what is the NHS doing about it? We must be one of the greatest generators of waste in the UK. Some hospitals have embraced greenness with enthusiasm, but others have a very long way to go.

Developing better methods of table-top sterilisation would be a start, as would more eco-friendly waste disposal. The NHS needs a sea change in its practice, before the seas change for good and we end up with a global catastrophe.

Jane Bates is an ophthalmic nurse in Hampshire

What should the new health and social care secretary prioritise?

A fresh pair of eyes and a new relationship have potential for good if the priorities of those involved are the same or similar. Mr Hancock has acknowledged that NHS staff feel undervalued, and that the NHS needs modernising, which I agree with. I would like to see a more inclusive platform for healthcare professionals to have input into government policy; we are a rich resource at his disposal, and listening to our views and expertise should be a priority.

Rachel Kent is a mental health nurse in London

I welcome Mr Hancock’s focus on technology, as the NHS urgently needs a decent, joined-up IT system where information can be shared and stored safely. But moving more care into the community and addressing the winter crises, which happen so often they are becoming a Christmas tradition, have to be top priorities. This means listening to staff, who experience the daily pressures and rewards of working in the NHS, and who know what works and what doesn’t.

Drew Payne is a community staff nurse in north London

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Mr Hancock needs to prioritise listening to healthcare professionals, and ensure that health and social care services are firmly integrated and based on the needs of individuals. A truly integrated care system involves working beyond our organisational boundaries to improve services. Coordination between the fragmented parts of the system will improve efficiency and bring financial benefits. More importantly, it will make a real difference to older people and those living with long-term conditions.

Clare Donaldson is a practice nurse prescriber in Cheshire

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