

REVISITING MAYO CLINIC, MINNESOTA: a lesson in medical leadership

My fellow passenger on the flight from USA on Sunday saw me reading the book: “Management lessons from Mayo Clinic” and started telling me about his father’s experience. His late father, who lived on the east coast, on being diagnosed with lung cancer few years ago, immediately decided that he had to be treated at Mayo Clinic- neither the father nor anyone else in the family was a medic and it was not someone’s else’s suggestion; it was simply that ‘pull’ of the Mayo Clinic which made him decide to go there. Just as thousands of patients do every year because Mayo Clinic is a national treasure, and a household name, in the USA and the place where ‘they perform miracles’.

I was on my way back from a rather hectic weeklong trip to USA during which I visited a number of institutions including the Mayo Clinic, Rochester, Minnesota. I was rather fortunate to have worked there, albeit for a few months only in 1991 as part of my public health training, and have always counted that as the most important period of my professional life. I was subsequently a periodic visitor there until the early 2000s when I stopped, so my visit last week came after nearly 12 years during which much has happened there.

There have been major physical changes in Rochester, Minnesota with the Gonda Building fully integrated with the rest of the Clinic and indeed the neighbourhood, the Arizona and Florida Mayo Clinics have become well established and the Mayo Clinic Health System is flourishing. And the Mayo Clinic, Minnesota is the top hospital in the USA in 2014-15.

Equally, what was (more) fascinating was what has not changed – Mayo Clinic is still true to the 3 conditions considered essential by the Founder Dr W W Mayo :

1. Continuing pursuit of the ideal of service and not profit
2. Continuing primary and sincere concern for the care and welfare of each individual patient
3. Continuing interest by every member of the staff in the professional progress of every other member

These have stood the test of the time, for well over a hundred years, and indeed “Patients First” is not a lapel pin but a way of working. I was accompanied on my trip by two non-medic colleagues from India, on their first visit to Mayo Clinic, and even they got it- the place oozes calm and they could see ‘patient centeredness’ and service everywhere.

To deliver this vision, the Clinic has put in place the necessary systems and procedures including for management and governance, and continues to review them to ensure that they remain fit for purpose. It is the longest established, integrated and largest multispecialty group practice.

But what to me is the most important lesson, and what makes Mayo Clinic what it is today, is the Physician Led nature of the organisation – administrators are partners but they are not equal partners, and this is purposeful. The rationale as explained by a senior administrator being “.... So why do we say physician-led rather than

administrator-led? The reason is that physician-led biases our decision making to the primary value upon which Mayo Clinic is founded – the interests of the patient rise above all other interests. When we have tough choices, when we hit an impasse, the physician's judgement, training and instincts tilt us towards the clinical side of the equation. That is what we want. We want that bias working through the myriad decisions that we are making daily. We want the institutional bias to be aimed toward the patient and the physician in our model. “

If ever proof was needed that physicians can create, sustain and lead a health care enterprise, then look no further. And as Dr Waller, a previous CEO said: Mayo, attracts the best physicians and “people do not stay in Rochester for the ‘weather or the money’. They come there because of the 3 founding conditions, to practice the best quality medicine and to care for their patients; and they are not naïve, they know the financial realities and manage resources.

It again brought home to me the exchange I had with a previous Chief Executive Officer (Dr Michael Wood who was the CEO from 1999-2003; the CEO has always been a doctor and from within the Mayo system) few years ago who told me of the various UK delegations who were making regular visits to the Clinic to learn the reasons for their success with a view to emulating it in the NHS. He commented that he wished he knew the formula as he could then ‘bottle’ it and make millions from its sale! The Clinic ‘happened’ when the original founder Dr William Worrall Mayo happened to be in Rochester at the time of the tornado in 1883 and then due to the long and hard work of his sons, William and Charles, with a small number of close associates, over the next few decades. Their leadership and usual ingredients of right time, right person, team work, and sustained effort over prolonged period were the reasons behind the success of the Clinic.

And it struck me again how we have not learnt this ‘simplest’ of lessons about medical leadership for the NHS: we have persistently failed to capitalise on the inherent and powerful potential of physicians as leaders. We have tried all sorts of solutions but this most obvious one. I was very privileged to have got to the Mayo Clinic at the start of my NHS management career since the learning there shaped my professional career, and I lament the gradual erosion of medical leadership in the NHS during the last two decades. As Mayo Clinic shows, empowering physicians and letting them lead with administration support can achieve best patient outcomes and create a financially sound organisation- what more could one wish for? Is not it time to call the doctor to save the NHS, and which is almost at its deathbed? Should we not be engaging and empowering doctors at this time?

Rajan Madhok

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rajan.madhok@btinternet.com

NOTE

For my views on medical leadership, you may want to see “*For what it is worth: Observations on management and leadership in the NHS, and the role of doctors in the future*” (available at <http://leadershipforhealth.com/resources/>)

As an aside I feel very privileged to be living in the birthplace of the founder of Mayo Clinic- Dr W W Mayo was born in Eccles, Salford. And something of his spirit must still be around since Salford Royal FT, based in the Eccles, is the top hospital in the NHS (and of course due to some (*sic*) effort from Sir David Dalton and his team! Note to self: Talk to David and see what can be learnt from SRFT journey so far although compared to Mayo it is in infancy, and is it designed to sustain?).



With my Indian colleagues in the library at Mayo Clinic, under Drs Will and Charles Mayo's portrait