

HEALTH REFORM - PARTNERS IN HEALTH CARE?

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Reforming a public health service is a difficult proposition under the best circumstances. Attitudes of health workers and the expectant public have become entrenched over the years and major change is bound to produce reaction and resistance. The public has come to expect an unlimited service for free. What is not perceived to be available in Malta is expected to be made available by referral to other centres abroad.

Nurses, notwithstanding the attempt to upgrade the profession, seem happy to accept that counting dirty sheets and escorting patients is part of their job but refuse to administer intravenous drugs. The half day working system is something many health workers - doctors included - would not like to see changed for the simple reason that it will interfere with their other job/s on which they depend financially.

All this and much more makes introducing radical changes in a Health Service that has, over the years, increased to mammoth proportions, particularly difficult. Nonetheless successive administrations have attempted radical changes and almost invariably they have attempted to do this without consulting the medical profession which is expected to implement the proposed changes. It is therefore not surprising that such attempted changes have been difficult to implement, have generated controversy and outright conflict and have all too often left results which leave much to be desired.

Notwithstanding all this, history seems to be repeating itself. The anti-climax of the GP Scheme seems not to have taught any lessons. Government having left primary health care untouched is now embarking on hospital reform, a need which MAM had insisted from the start should be given priority.

Government is proposing radical changes in our hospitals though in many important areas the plan is worryingly vague - one gets the impression that not even Government knows what the plan is when it comes to certain important issues. Yet again Government has not consulted MAM in the slightest, in spite of our offers and our track record of genuinely wishing to participate in Health Reform. This is all the more the pity because there is much in what

Government is proposing with which MAM is very much in agreement. The refurbishment of St Luke's is essential, the idea of "independent" management of various units be they hospitals or departments and the abolition of central control over the most trivial matters is equally essential.

The handing over of an old people's residence to private management is a breath of fresh air. On the other hand the San Raffaele project remains shrouded in mystery and controversy. Both may be the result of the lack of openness and lack of information that have been Government policy on this important issue. Why does one of our major hospitals (to be) require foreign management when the natives are good enough for St. Luke's, Boffa, Zammit Clapp, Mount Carmel, St Vincent de Paul, Gozo General - or do we need foreign management for all our hospitals? Why San Raffaele not anyone else and if all we need is Milanese management skills why the name, that gives the indelible impression that this will be a branch of the mother hospital?

If we could resolve our socio-geriatric problem by transferring all these long stay patients from our hospitals to nursing homes whether private or Government run, (preferably the former) would we still need a new hospital to solve the problem of overcrowding? Is the whizz technology (patient's records on computer by the bedside, postmortem transmitted to offices) being proposed justified? And will it be at the expense of other more essential facilities in other parts of the health service?

The Medical Association of Malta believes and knows that it has much to offer in planning and implementing Health Reform. It has a wealth of experience both locally and internationally, the combination of which cannot be matched by any other individual or group of people. It is offering this expertise for the benefit of the Maltese patient. One hopes it will not be a case of 'pearls before swine' or as they say in Din l-Art Helwa: "Biskuttini f'halq il-hmir."

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