

# HEALTHCARE **Healthcare** SUNDAY **in Crisis?**

**15 October 2000**

The NHS is one of the biggest employers in the world, employing over 1,000,000 people. It could be said to be the best health system in the world, yet the people who work in it are often under huge pressure. Those such as care assistants, cleaners and porters are often among the lowest paid in the country.

Aspirations of care are high and political pressures increase constantly. The demands that this puts on the service can mean that healthcare workers are under enormous strain. With these increasing demands there are often inadequate resources. There is a shortage of doctors, nurses and care staff in many parts of the country. There is under-funding of health services in this country in comparison to all of our European neighbours.

Many trained as doctors or nurses out of a sense of vocation. However vocation is hardly ever mentioned today. In the past healthcare was often provided by the church and religious institutions. Christian values and beliefs would have been inherent in such structures.

Today with the huge complexities and expense of modern healthcare the state has taken over health provision. Some feel that the cost has been that, increasingly, Christian values are being lost, although there remains, in many, a deep concern over ethics and morality. Nevertheless, fundamental values are slowly moving away from their Christian roots.

Christians working within healthcare, therefore, face a number of issues. The work is hard, often poorly remunerated and demanding very long hours. Often working conditions are far from ideal. Many are tired and weary. The pressure of work is so much that many within the professions are forced to take early retirement. Many are confused and troubled by the gradual ethical slip. Attitudes and actions that would have not been tolerated 20, 30 or 40 years ago now seemed to be commonplace. For many, there also seems to be little support either from inside or outside of the system.

Today, society has also changed. Family units are small nuclear units rather than large extended families. In years gone by, these extended families would expect to care for elderly relatives or those who were infirm. Today many people are isolated from the traditional caring structures of church and family. For them, the NHS or social services, over-stretched and with inadequate budgets, are often the only means of care. In this field there is a huge opportunity for churches to consider what their role should be within our society.

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# Church Action

On Healthcare Sunday, therefore, it is suggested that churches could consider the following:

- Seek out those working within the NHS and other caring professions;
- Encourage them to understand that the work they do is valuable. If Jesus were to return to visit our towns today, He would be as likely to be found in the hospital, or in the drug rehabilitation centre as in the church. Pray for them and encourage them. Affirm what they do and reassure them that if they cannot attend church functions or contribute to the programme because of the pressure of their work they are nonetheless important members of the church.
- Look for ways of developing relevant support groups and prayer networks for those whose major calling in life is to be Christians working in healthcare.
- Look for those who care for others within your congregation. They may be looking after elderly parents, a neighbour, or others who are ill or in need. Often such commitment to caring is long-term and unnoticed hard work. Often it results in inability to attend church functions. Pray for them and reassure them of their place in the church body.

The loss of the sense of vocation among those who care should concern us greatly. In a materialistic society where self gratification is increasingly important Christians need to rediscover the concept of *'taking up their cross'* in healthcare and following Jesus. In a fragmented society where the family is breaking down and where health and other caring systems are coming under increasing pressure, the church needs to ask whether there is a role that it should also fulfil.

It would not be over stating the case to say that healthcare is in crisis.

Has the church got anything to say?

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