

Weekly message 27th October 2014

I took my summer holiday late this year and went to Sicily returning just a couple of weeks ago. Sicily is famous for its people (fictional or otherwise) from Archimedes to Inspector Montalbano and for its climate, coastline, antiquities and food – personally I love arancini (the Cornish pasty of Sicily). But sadly it is probably the Mafia which strikes the biggest chord when thinking of Sicily. We didn't see much sign of it other than the characteristic half-built buildings dominating the outskirts of every town and the sinister (in our imaginations) older man in a dark suit and tie who sat in the back office of our unnervingly empty hotel without whose permission the front of house staff could not decide anything! But no horse's head in the bed.

One of the most famous Sicilian Mafiosi of all time was [Lucky Luciano](#) the father (or perhaps more appropriately godfather) of American organised crime. My only reason for mentioning him (and for this long preamble) is that he is the first direct quotation I could find using the term “political football”. “I been a political football” he is said to have exclaimed in 1953 – sounding petulant on being called to account for the number of people wearing cement shoes and sleeping with the fishes!

The phrase “political football” has been used a great deal over the last few weeks and months about the NHS. The latest example was the Daily Mail's series of articles published last week – you are free to read them if you want to – but I would also read the [Western Mail's](#) publication of the response to it as well. All four of the political parties have accused each other of using the NHS as a political football – a sure sign that they are continuing to do so – and probably will until the general election in May 2015 – and perhaps, God forbid, until the assembly elections in 2016! Prepare yourselves.

If you want a reasoned analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of the four NHS systems across the UK (Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland and England) I would read this [Nuffield Trust report](#) published in April this year. It is not written by politicians, journalists or NHS managers but by independent analysts. It (justifiably) criticises the Welsh NHS for longer waiting lists but concludes that in all other regards the outcomes from the four systems have moved closer together over the last ten years rather than further apart. Too boring for headlines – but important to the people working in and using the service.

I don't know about you but this toxic coverage which frightens patients and demoralises staff was beginning to get me down last week.

However – I was cured! I went to the [Chairman's Awards ceremony](#) on Thursday.

I was humbled and energised by the truly wonderful work that colleagues are doing across our whole organisation. Everyone; nominated, finalists and winners are inspirational. It is invidious to give a special mention of any of them – but I am going to do it anyway because they struck a chord.

The team from the Forge Centre in Port Talbot run a Christmas lunch for their service users. Volunteers give up their own Christmas to do this and the money is donated by well wishers. This project did not win in its category of “Going the extra mile” such was the high standard of the other entries (Firdaus Adenwalla the other finalist and Paul Harris – the winner). But I must admit I reflected – wouldn’t it be nice, if just for a day, or even a week – our newspapers would choose to put this kind of project on their front pages. These colleagues are the real NHS full of compassion and genuine care.

To donate (time or money) to the Forge Centre Christmas lunches please contact Jane Briggs CPN (Jane.Briggs@wales.nhs.uk or Jane Briggs, Forge Centre, Forge Road, Port Talbot. SA13 1PA).