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New Year honours: NHS talent should get the recognition it deserves

Margaret Casely-Hayford

Department of Health keen to encourage nominations from health and social care services, and hopes for greater diversity

Tue 30 Dec 2014 08.30 GMT



Twice a year the honours list receives attention from the British press and each time it's met with a degree of scepticism and cynicism by a large part of the British public. The press often focuses on the rich and famous,

leaving many to suspect that the good (but not so great) have been left unsung.

This is not true. Successive governments have tried to improve the honours system in different ways to increase the chances of our less well-known heroes being recognised; for example, with the introduction of public nominations in 1993, and the development of independent selection committees since 2005 which has allowed greater transparency across the whole system. More recently, the reintroduction of the British Empire Medal in 2012 has rewarded ordinary people for sustained local contributions in many walks of life.

Now some 6,000 to 7,000 nominations result in approximately 3,000 honours being awarded each year. And the make-up of those receiving awards has changed too. Of 1,149 people who received awards for the Queen's birthday in 2014, 73% worked in their local community in some way - 49% were women, and 6.5% were from black and minority ethnic communities.

But there is still some way to go for the health service. In 2013, only 26 of 73 Department of Health (DH) nominations were for women, and not one was for a member of black and minority ethnic communities. The DH is keen to encourage nominations from across the health service, and would like to see much greater diversity. So we need to put our thinking caps on and come up with names of people we believe deserve an honour.

There should be no shortage of ideas - everyone working in our health service knows one worthy candidate. This could be someone who has made an impact on their workplace or community; the nurse who works tirelessly to improve care or the courageous whistleblowers who speaks up when the system should be doing better. Basically, all of those who give a little thought about how to improve the lot of people who rely on our health service, and are less able to help themselves.

All who work in the health and care systems need to ask themselves: what makes this person special? What have they achieved? How did they make a difference? Did they overcome some obstacles or do they go the extra mile? Could they be described as a role model? Explain these simply and you might be doing that person the most enormous honour, and giving a boost to the team they work in.

Nominations can be made of, and by, people at any level of seniority in the NHS. Analysis of previous submissions suggests that people might have been of the view that senior ranking people were the most suitable candidates. In 2014, the 2013 position was improved upon as 150 nominations were made. But now the DH would like to see closer to 600.

The search for nominees for the Queen's Birthday Honours 2015 has begun. Department of Health committees met during the autumn, and the independent selection committees will meet next spring. Over the months ahead, I would urge people all across the health system to consider deserving colleagues and to make the next round of nominations count. There are no guarantees, and candidates should not be told when a submission is being made. But the challenge to all of us is to ensure that the full spectrum of talent across our health and care systems gets the recognition it deserves. Nothing ventured, nothing gained.

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