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To All Health Service Staff

Dear Colleague,

I am taking the unprecedented step of writing today to every single member of Health Service staff in Ireland, both those employed directly by the HSE and those in HSE funded services.

I know that colleagues throughout the service come to work each day to give of their very best work. Sometimes this is challenging as a result of increased demands, fewer staff and similar issues. I want to acknowledge the excellent work that the majority of people employed in the health services are doing in very challenging circumstances with significantly reduced funding and employment numbers.

However last week a television programme demonstrated that what really matters most to those who depend on our services is how we respond when things go wrong. When things go wrong, and in any health system this will happen, those who depend on us are at their most vulnerable. This is when they need us to care and, most of all, to show that we care by what we do. When things go wrong we must be open about this and communicate honestly with patients and families. Far too often it appears that this is not the case. While I am sure that these are exceptions, there are just too many of them. This erodes public confidence in Health Services, it lets down the public and it lets down the service as a whole. It also lets down the many dedicated and deeply caring staff who every day provide excellent care throughout the service.

Not enough has been done to create a common culture across the health services. Islands of excellence now share the same identity as instances of significant underperformance and serious failure. As we head towards a new set of health organisation arrangements and the post HSE period it is important that we accept responsibility for our culture, change the way we work and hold one another accountable to remain true to delivering best possible care in every setting and situation.

Sometimes there are appalling lapses in the way we care for people, which can be hard to comprehend. All that is required to put this right is for each one of us, without exception, to commit ourselves to doing one extraordinarily simple thing. What I am asking is that all of us, at all times, look after every patient or client with exactly the same level of consideration that we would if they were our parent, sibling, partner or child. In other words - just as we would wish to be treated ourselves. This is even more important when things have gone wrong, for whatever reason.

We must ensure that we never again hear about grieving parents being denied the opportunity to treat their dead new-born child with dignity and respect – this is everybody's right and expectation. That we never again hear that a patient who has had an unexpected outcome or who has been harmed has reason to believe

that instead of seeking to address their concerns openly and honestly the Health Service has responded with apparently unfeeling bureaucracy, excessive defensiveness and in a way that appears to serve only self-interest.

Responding adequately ¹ in these situations can be difficult and challenging – but how we respond at these times as individuals and as a health service is the true test of what kind of people and organisation we are. The fact that at times like this our clients/patients or their relatives or survivors can be distressed, upset or even hostile makes it even more important that we respond to them with absolute humanity and care.

Inevitably, we will all have to continue to live with the consequences and distress of past mistakes for some time to come. The purpose of this letter is not to cast blame but simply to ask every single person working in the health service in Ireland to see to it that we do not add to those mistakes. That, no matter what our role or position, we join together to say that from this point forward we will collectively do better every day.

For those who have always lived up to this standard I express my personal thanks.

To those who may not always have lived up to this standard I ask you to make a new beginning today.

With the roll out of the Government's health reform programme there will be important structural changes such as Hospital Groups, Community Health Organisations, the Health Care Commissioning Agency and so on. These are important and they do provide us with opportunities for improvement. However, the most important change we need to make does not need to await structural change. We can act together to address fundamental issues of culture in a way that has not happened in the past. I hope and expect that I can rely on you to help us all to make this change – this new beginning, because put at its simplest - we need to do this now.

I welcome your feedback and suggestions on how we can perform any part of our tasks better. I have established an email address at suggestionstodg@hse.ie to which you can send such feedback and suggestions. Each will be treated seriously.

Finally I make a personal commitment to you that I, and all those who are members of the leadership of the Health Service, will seek to support you in your work as we individually and collectively endeavour to improve the health service so that we can be proud of it and that our patients and clients can have trust in it.

Yours sincerely,



Tony O'Brien
Director General

¹ Useful guidance is available at www.hse.ie/opendisclosure