

Hunt lectures on health of nation

HEALTH Secretary is the only cabinet role that colleagues are not jealous of, according to Jeremy Hunt, Farnham's MP.

Nevertheless, as the holder of that post, he counts the appointment as "the biggest privilege of my life", he told the audience, as he delivered the Farnham Lecture 2013 on the Health of the Nation at South Farnham School last Friday.

The 25th lecture to be organised by the Farnhamian 400 Trust, part of the Old Farnhamians linked to the former Farnham Grammar School, it took place on Mr Hunt's 47th birthday.

Cyril Trust, chairman of the trust, introduced the speaker and presented him with a set of Old Farnhamians cufflinks and tie, which he wore for the talk.

The Health Secretary described his efforts to "get out into the NHS" by volunteering every week, undertaking tasks including answering phones in a busy GP surgery and cleaning a commode, dressing wounds and taking blood pressures in hospitals.

Often backhanded compliments would be forthcoming from staff - "You are much nicer than we thought you would be" or "You look better than you do on television".

"But I am always very humbled by the people I meet. I do think people on the front line are remarkable," Mr Hunt commented.

He stressed that history would judge politicians not just by the dizzy heights of office they might reach, but

by the things they manage to change.

However, the NHS is the fifth largest employer in the world, with 1.7 million staff and only beaten in size by the Chinese Army, US Department of Defence, McDonald's and Walmart. "Don't just imagine that because you pull a lever that everything is going to change on the ground," he said.

With life expectancy going up by two years every decade, the demands of an ageing population was one of two main challenges facing the NHS, the other being sustainability in the face of the financial demands placed by new treatments and new drugs becoming available.

"Every day you live you are banking another 24 hours at the end of your life," Mr Hunt warned. "It is the biggest responsibility of my generation of politicians, whether we make the judgement that such a period at the end of life is a period we look forward to, or a period we dread."

A quarter of the population has a chronic conditions such as asthma, diabetes, arthritis, heart disease or dementia and within the next few years three million people, "the frequent flyers", would have three or more such conditions.

"That requires a very fundamental change in the model of the NHS," said the Health Secretary, pointing out that typically patients would not leave hospital "cured", but with long-term conditions that need to be handled at home. It was false economy not to look

after these people properly.

Mr Hunt said that although the last government did some good things - for instance bringing down waiting lists - it made a very big mistake in 2004, abolishing "named" GPs.

"When people come out of hospital care it is not clear where the buck stops... sometimes you have a fantastic GP who takes on that role; often they are too busy to take on that pro-active task."

His solution lay in "very difficult" negotiations currently under way with the BMA over GP contracts, so that a named clinician would be responsible for every patient over the age of 75, whether in hospital, a care home or their own home.

Turning to the second challenge, the sustainability of the health service, he explained: "In simple terms we are doing nearly one million more operations a year on the NHS on the same money."

The Health Secretary said that, despite this pressure, there was a need to raise standards and tackle situations such as that which existed at the Mid Staffordshire Hospital.

He had taken inspiration from the schools' inspection system operated by Ofsted, which listed all schools as "outstanding", "good", "requires improvement" or "inadequate".

"When a school fails its Ofsted all hell breaks loose and there is huge pressure on the politicians, Surrey County Council, the head may often lose their job, governors may be changed



Jeremy Hunt pictured with trust chairman Cyril Trust on his left, South Farnham headteacher Andrew Carter on his right, and Old Boys of the former Farnham Grammar School.

and no-one can duck the issue.

"We have had some hospitals which have failed over many, many years," he said, adding that this was now being tackled by the new Care Quality Commission inspections, a peer review which would give an overall judgment on each hospital plus judgements on individual departments.

"I am the first Health Secretary to put 12 hospitals under special measures in one year," he pointed out, adding that there will also

be a chief inspector of adult social care going round every care home plus a chief inspector of GPs.

One consequence was that over 12 months the NHS had decided it wants to recruit another 7,000 nurses, "because it has suddenly realised hospitals are going to be judged on the quality of care they provide as much as whether they meet their targets on waiting lists".

Mr Hunt saw the new inspection regime as enabling the scrapping of a lot of targets, giving hospi-

tals the freedom to experiment and innovate.

"One of the things we are suffering from is a huge number of targets that micro-manage processes rather than outcomes," he pointed out.

Answering questions following the lecture, the speaker said part of the culture change needed was to invest in prevention as well as cure. Giving the budget of the NHS to GP groups to decide how to spend it was one step in this direction.

He added that health and

social care budgets had not been integrated properly, explaining that by April each are would have to have an integrated plan.

Patient records also needed to be shared, so that patients would not arrive in hospital from care homes without anyone knowing what conditions they had and what medication they were on. Staff could then spend more time providing care, less on admin.

Another questioner referred to the agitation felt by many people about pri-

vate companies making a profit from being involved in running NHS services.

Jeremy Hunt replied that while in the private sector there was a profit motive, there was also a lot of innovation. He mentioned a company in India that does cataract operations for one sixth of the cost of the NHS and also has better results.

"I think local doctors should make those decisions, and decide what is best for patients in their area," he commented.