

Quality and efficiency are allies, not enemies

There is still plenty of work to do to raise efficiency and quality in various public services. Some in the public sector seem to think efficiency means cuts, and cuts means lower quality. That is not the way to do it. Doing things efficiently should mean doing them better.

If you get something right first time you avoid the costs of changing and remedying, or the even bigger costs of having to apologise and compensate if the good or service has gone out in bad shape. If you harness more machine and computing power to a good programme design you can improve accuracy and quality whilst speeding up the process and cutting its cost. Modern digital technology offers huge scope to both raise quality and cut costs if done well. It also offers new ways to mess things up and to make life more difficult for the consumer.

Let's take the case of NHS supplies. A good system would cut down stockholding of drugs and specialised food products in the system, reducing waste from poor holding and handling, and from items going out of date. More just in time deliveries to hospitals, surgeries and users would reduce the amount of medicine or specialist food that is tipped away as unwanted when a patient recovers. Some hospitals still do not have computer controlled drug dispensing, with suitable controls over what is administered, when and in what quantities. Doing it through a drugs trolley with staff members reading the notes and then fidnign the medicine leaves more scope for error than a system based on a patients computer record and computerised handling of the required drugs. I have talked before about the return and reuse of hardware like wheelchairs, crutches and other aids.

There is the direction and use of manpower. Public service personnel are crucial to successful public services. Their dedication and professional skill are the essence of much of it. Not only do they need proper computer and machine back up to do their jobs, but they also need intelligent direction of effort by management who see where they are needed and can make their best input. Some managers do this well, but there needs to be a constant effort to ensure personnel are well deployed. I have seen cases where two health visitors have turned up to an elderly person facing a problem, only to discover neither of them could resolve the query. Home visits are important but are expensive, so it is crucial the preparation for them directs the right manpower to the right home to sort the issue.