

Publishing Editor's column

IMPROVING STANDARDS in the public sector is one of the great mantras of our time, especially in Britain during the twelve years of the present government. More money has been poured into the health service, which has undoubtedly resulted in improved treatment and reduced waiting times for appointments. But how can it be established that improvements are being made? There seem to be two main aspects to this: filling in forms and regular inspections. Both of these methods have their problems. It is eleven years since I had to work for a living, and in my limited experience there was already a tendency to ensure that at all costs the figures looked good rather than being a strictly accurate reflection of the position. In the wider field of hospitals, attention to meeting response and treatment times has resulted in procedures being manipulated to produce the best figures, but not necessarily in ways that are best for the patient.

As for inspections, they do not always produce an accurate picture. This has been shown to be so in two high-profile cases recently. Haringey (a London borough) council's children's services department was widely castigated for not having prevented appalling acts of cruelty against a child, and senior staff were sacked. Yet when inspected it had been judged to be doing well. A large hospital was discovered to have been seriously lacking in the way it looked after elderly patients, yet when inspected it had been given the highest rating. Why do such things happen? Presumably it is because inspections cannot be totally comprehensive, and an organisation faced with inspections concentrates on what it needs to do to get a good assessment.

When cases like this emerge, or even individual cases come to light, the media makes a lot of them, not always fairly. This leads to individuals thinking things are worse than they actually are. Things have improved, but people's expectations have increased. Regarding health services, those of us in the Western world should be truly thankful for what we have, for it is far superior to what most of the world has. However, the emphasis now seems to be on appearance more than substance; being seen to be continually improving. Likewise politicians are concerned more and more with appearances; statistics are massaged to present the best possible picture, new initiatives are announced that in practice never get implemented.

The truth of the matter is, of course, that we cannot expect constantly improving standards in a largely godless society subject to mortality. Those striving to improve educational standards are severely hampered by the breakdown of family life and the increasing difficulty in imposing standards of discipline. Health services are hampered by having to cope with increased violence, drug and alcohol abuse and mental problems. Survival rates from cancer, heart disease and strokes improve, only for people to need care for dementia and other problems that come with age. These things will not improve until the Kingdom, when Christ will deal with the fundamental problem of human wickedness in all its various forms; and in this, of course, he will include the whole world, not just those parts that have seen the great advancements of modern times.

To return to the idea of making things look better than they are, of projecting the best possible image, not always entirely truthfully, we can apply this on an individual level. To get on in the world it is often necessary to project yourself; not just doing a good job, but making it known that you are doing a good job. But here there is a problem. Such an attitude has no place in the ecclesia. It is not acceptable to promote ourselves, for example, at ecclesial elections. The attitude of mind we are commanded to have is, "let nothing be done through strife or vainglory; but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than themselves" (Phil. 2:3). Such an attitude of mind would not get us very far in the world.

The truth is that increasingly the attitude of mind that we should have in the ecclesia is different from that which we are called upon to have in the world, and the attitude that we should have to our work is not that of the world in general. Regarding work, Paul's words are clear; servants are to be obedient to their masters, "not with eyeservice, as menpleasers; but as servants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart" (Eph. 6:5,6). It might be said that today it can be a problem to find those willing to serve in the ecclesia, but nevertheless much good work is still done, both ecclesially and inter-ecclesially. We should do this as well as we can, but what matters in the end is not how other brethren and sisters regard it but how our Master regards it, and this we shall one day discover.

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