We can improve patient care by encouraging staff to be innovative

Frontline nurses are best placed to identify the changes that are needed to improve care, and their ideas must be encouraged to enable best practice, says Lord Darzi.

I am very aware that the NHS is full of brilliant and talented people like you, who come to work each day because they want to make a difference to each patient they work with.

However, I also know that what often causes the most frustration is that you sometimes feel the system hinders and obstructs you from doing this. We must remove barriers so that staff have the freedom to make the changes needed to deliver the best care for patients.

I know as well that staff working on the front line are best placed to identify the changes needed to improve the quality of patient care and the patient experience.

The most common complaint I heard when talking to staff about my report on the future of the NHS – High Quality Care for All – was not that there was a lack of things to improve – it was about the struggle they often had to find the funds and support to make ideas become reality.

To this end, a number of recent initiatives aim to create a culture within the NHS where innovation and new ideas are encouraged and can flourish. You will be central to their operation and success.

One of the developments most relevant to frontline staff is a £220m Innovation Fund, which is now available to capture your ideas and implement them at patient bedside, in day centres or in GP surgeries. This money will be given directly to the surgeries. This money will be given directly to the frontline staff as they develop, disseminate and adopt new ideas.

Alongside this, I also announced a groundbreaking £20m challenge to the NHS and wider public to help tackle the key health issues facing the nation. A panel of experts will create a shortlist of possible challenges, with the final list to be announced later this year after we have sought the views of the public.

NICE recently launched NHS Evidence (www.evidence.nhs.uk) to provide the best evidence and information in the world to all NHS clinicians and staff. I encourage you all to log on and try it out.

I would also like to invite as many of you as possible to attend the forthcoming NHS Innovation EXPO event, to be held at London’s Excel Centre on 18–19 June. The EXPO will bring together public, private, scientific, academic and voluntary sectors to showcase healthcare innovation, enabling thousands of NHS and social care staff to experience and adopt the latest innovation initiatives and best practice. Visit www.healthcareinnovationexpo.com for more information and to register.

Having worked in the health service for the past 20 years, I know that change can sometimes be seen as a threat, rather than an opportunity. However, I am always heartened when I consider the achievements of individuals such as Dame Cicely Saunders, the nurse credited with founding the modern hospice movement, and Peter Mansfield, whose work on the invention of the MRI scanner was recognised with the award of a Nobel Prize in 2003.

The NHS has a long and proud track record of innovating and delivering better care for patients, and that needs to continue.

Quality and innovation are everyone’s business. The NHS must be a place where best practice is the minimum we expect of ourselves. Innovation is central to this and with it we can build the best health system in the world.

Lord Ara Darzi is health minister