

NHS trusts lambasted for failing to tackle race inequality

The NHS national director for equality and human rights, Surinder Sharma, has lambasted NHS trusts, including those taking a lead on the issue, for failing to make better progress on race equality.

Mr Sharma was speaking in London at the annual conference of the government sponsored Race for Health programme, which aims to boost race equality in the NHS. Black and minority ethnic people were experiencing glaring inequalities in health outcomes, service provision, and employment opportunities in the NHS he said.

These were "unacceptable" and were a flagrant breach of the values on which the health service was founded, and they constituted a failure to deliver "fundamental human rights," he said. "We talk about it, but put it in the 'too difficult to do box' and do our day job and then turn our attention to race equality if we have time. That has got to change."

"We are not performing, and the boards and the chief executives need to take responsibility," he said, adding that the solutions were often not complicated.

But trusts even found it difficult to comply with basic legislation, Mr Sharma said. In November the Healthcare Commission's online audit of trusts' compliance with the Race Relations (Amendment) Act of 2000 showed that just 9% had published all the legally required documentation on their websites (www.healthcarecommission.org.uk).

This finding prompted the health services watchdog to announce an inspection of more than 40 trusts to check on what steps they are taking to meet their legal duties.

A number of the then 15 primary care trusts in the Race for Health programme were among those that were not fully compliant, said Mr Sharma.

"One of the things we're going to be doing is not working with NHS organisations that are not meeting their legal obligations. That's got to be the line in the sand," he warned.

Health minister Ivan Lewis, whose portfolio includes the race equality agenda, praised the achievements of the Race for Health trusts.

"But there's a long, long way to go," he said. "We won't be able to make the kind of progress I would like to see unless [race equality] becomes a mainstream issue for the NHS. It has to be at the heart of every NHS organisation's DNA."

Leading rabbi Baroness Julia Neuberger said there was still a lot of racism in medicine, which was apparent in recruitment and retention practice.

"Things have got a bit better, but change has not been significant or sustainable," she said. "There's a huge issue about doctors who are trained overseas. We still need to challenge the Department of Health and the BMA about that."

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