

Caring is just one of the three vital skills in teaching



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COLUMNIST

I CHAIR an organisation called 'Coping with Cancer North East'. When I asked our Chief Executive, Judith Woodruff, how much stress we should put on caring for those in need compared to the emphasis we put on skills and expertise, Judith's answer was immediate - 'care is number one'. My response, having been subject to numerous hospital operations was: 'I care about care and care how good the surgeons are.'

We often question the motivations of teachers and doctors, particularly when they are involved in industrial disputes. How can they care about children if they put their professional self-interest first?

I sometimes hear people say that teaching is no longer a vocation. Teaching has become, like many other professions, subject to external bureaucratic control by people who are more concerned about achieving statistical targets than caring for those they serve.

I have always believed care for children would be the essential prerequisite of anyone deciding to be a teacher.

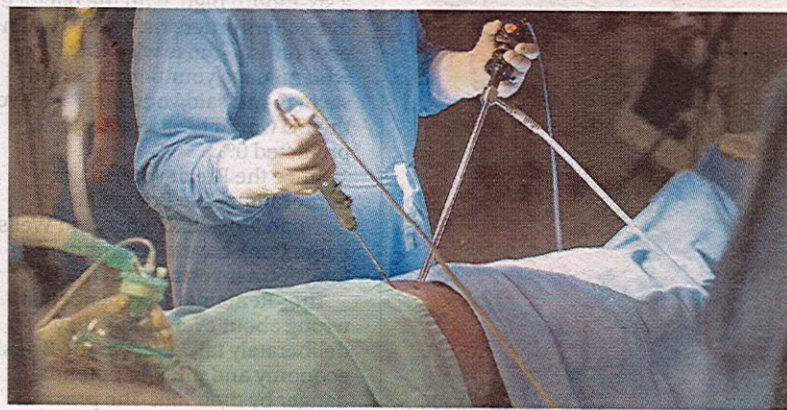
The big challenge in our new educational world is the centrality of care within our profession. Can care for the individual child, particularly those who find success hard to come by, realistically survive in a world driven by competition and market forces?

Increasingly, school leaders are judged by their technical expertise - expertise in data management, financial management and planning being three examples.

We would always want teachers to put their care of children before everything else. Equally we would want those who operate in hospitals to care about the patients.

When I look at those who have responsibility for the lives of others, for example, surgeons, the emphasis on technical expertise is pronounced. A booklet produced by the Royal College of Surgeons, 'So you want to be a surgeon', does not once mention the need to care about people or that the potential surgeon should have a concern about the well-being of patients.

When the Royal College asks if someone is cut out to be a surgeon



➤ Imagine if a surgeon did not care whether a patient lived or died

they say the following is required:

- Specialist knowledge for accurate diagnosis of a patient's condition;
- Good communication skills - for speaking to your medical team, your patients and their families; for listening to and understanding the concerns of a wide range of people and earning their trust;
- Extensive experience of pre-operative and post-operative care;
- A bright, eager mind, manual dexterity and physical skills for performing an operation.

In 2000 I contracted colon cancer and in 2009 I contracted prostate cancer. On both occasions the cancer was sorted by cutting out bits of me.

After the operations I was often asked what the surgeon was like. Was he or she good? Certainly I couldn't describe their 'bedside manner'. It is difficult to judge expertise when you are flat out unconscious. I therefore judged their expertise by the results.

So when a hospital or school trust is faced with judgements, which are based on the 'survival rate' of patients or the success rate of students what do we want their response to be?

One of the challenges for those working in schools is where we are on the continuum of professional behaviour. On one side we may have too little care for the child. At the other extreme we may have too much emotional involvement with the individual child.

If doctors are cold, objective and uncaring for the patient or student they may even avoid risking their reputations by taking on high risk challenges. If they are driven by their emotional concern for the well-being of the individual they may take responsibility without having the

expertise or capacity.

I have often considered that care, like revenge, can only be delivered coldly. Imagine a surgeon who cared so much for the well-being of the patient that the hand that held the scalpel shook during the operation or anxiety affected judgement? Also imagine a surgeon who not did care whether a patient lived or died?

When you are about to have major surgery, capability is all. Yes I hope the surgeon cares about me and I hope she or he is confident. Most of all I want surgeons to be good at their job.

When I am asked why I have been involved in education so long I rarely say because I care about children. Please don't get me wrong. I do care about children, because they are human beings. But would they be happy that I had a caring side and confidence in my own ability whilst at the same time I was not a capable teacher and they learned nothing?

There is always the balance to be struck between having:

- professional knowledge and understanding;
- professional skills and abilities;
- professional knowledge and personal commitment.

As a headteacher one of my strap lines for the school was - caring, confident and capable. I would argue that, for my own children, I would want them to be all three. I want them to be concerned about other people, have a positive outlook on life and of course be expert in what they do.

These elements are like a three-legged stool.

Any one of them missing will do a disservice to the child. However as leaders to accomplish great things, we must first show our children that we truly care and then demonstrate our knowledge, our skills and abilities.

■ Les Walton is chair of the Northern Education Trust.

■ Post script: Coping with Cancer is looking for new Board Members. If you are interested, please send an email to christine.hopkins@northerneducation.com

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