

Mr Chancellor,

I find the experience of watching our graduating medical students stand to recite Newcastle University's version of the hippocratic oath incredibly moving. This important rite of passage as they embark upon their professional careers contains much to reassure any future patient, with its references to professional competence and always treating one's patients with dignity and respect. However, the line which really stands out for me is the one with which the declaration ends: "Above all, I dedicate my professional life to the service of those entrusted to my care". That's quite a commitment.

Dr Peter Pronovost, whom we are honouring today, is a shining exemplar of that closing declaration. He is world renowned champion of patient safety and a practicing critical care physician. He is Senior Vice-President for Patient Safety and Director of the Armstrong Institute for Patient Safety and Quality at Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine, where he also Professor of Anaesthesiology and Critical Care Medicine.

The work for which Dr Pronovost is best known was inspired by the death of a little girl called Josie King, who died from a catheter infection. The sadness of her passing was magnified by the fact that what killed her was a wholly preventable infection. The statistics at the time concerning this particular cause of death were quite horrifying: more than thirty thousand deaths per year in the United States – a figure on a par with deaths from breast and prostate cancer. Peter Pronovost was determined that Josie's death should not have been in vain. Recognising that any attempt to bring in new procedures would have to be simpler than current practice if they were to be widely adopted, Dr Pronovost came up with a simple five-point checklist to avoid line infections,

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which he initially introduced at Johns Hopkins. The results were dramatic – the infection rate plummeted from 11% to zero. Over the next few years, the programme was extended to hospitals in Michigan, and by 2009, the then US Secretary for Health and Human Services, Kathleen Sebelius, announced that the checklist would be rolled out to twenty eight states with a view to cutting line infections by 75% in three years.

In December 2009, Dr Pronovost’s pioneering programme was piloted in the UK as part of a two year project called Matching Michigan. The project was launched here in the North East at a briefing chaired by our Chancellor, Professor Sir Liam Donaldson, who was then the UK’s Chief Medical Officer. Speaking at the launch, Sir Liam observed that, “Matching Michigan has proved to save a significant number of patient lives in America and I am delighted that we have had a positive response from trusts in this country to the scheme.” A report published in the British Medical Journal in 2013 suggests that over the course of the UK trial, catheter infections reduced by 60%. The checklist has now been implemented worldwide via the World Health Organisation’s Surgical Safety checklist.

Dr Pronovost’s pioneering work has been recognised by many notable awards. In 2008, he was awarded a MacArthur fellowship, often referred to as a “genius grant”, which is given to individuals who have shown extraordinary originality and dedication in their pursuits. His outstanding professional achievement and commitment to service was further recognised in 2011, when he was elected to the Institute of Medicine, which is one of the highest honours in health and medicine in the United States. In 2013, Dr Pronovost was named a Gilman Scholar at Johns Hopkins University, an honour accorded only to those who have achieved the highest standards of scholarship.

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The success of Dr Pronovost's plan is attributable to many factors, not the least of which is his own extraordinary drive and commitment. He was quick to recognise that what was needed was a scientifically rigorous yet common sense plan, communicated in a manner which did not judge or blame health care professionals for past practice. Instead, he encouraged them to come together as connected communities to solve the shared problem of preventable catheter infections. He also realised that the solution he sought required a bridge to be built across cultures, to bring together those with expertise in quality improvement with those specialising in clinical care. And to be truly transformational at organisational level, Pronovost recognised that he needed to engage all key stakeholders: senior leaders, project staff and front line workers to engage, execute and evaluate the plan of action.

Dr Pronovost's wife, Dr Marlene Miller, a leading paediatrician who is also a Professor at Johns Hopkins University, describes her husband as a big picture thinker, who is also extremely focussed and proudly observes that despite his many achievements, he still retains a genuine sense of humility. If he hadn't chosen a career in medicine, she thinks he might have been a ski instructor or a mountain guide. Maybe even a politician. No doubt he would have been hugely successful in any of these roles. When asked which of her husband's many achievements she think he is most proud of, Dr Miller chose to highlight improving the lives of patients, inspiring and guiding healthcare workers and their organisations to improve, and mentoring others. She believes that he would like his professional legacy to be that he advanced leadership in healthcare, adding that, "Peter defines leadership as the ability to bring people together to solve problems that will make the world a better place. That is the main thing that he does."

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Almost fifty years ago, on this very spot, the American civil rights campaigner Dr Martin Luther King, received an honorary degree from Newcastle University. Amongst the many memorable lines that form part of his legacy, there is one which seems particularly appropriate to reference here. At the end of a sermon in which Dr King outlined the choice between living a life of creative altruism or destructive selfishness, he concluded that, “life’s most persistent and urgent question, is what are you doing for others?” In the case of Dr Pronovost, it is abundantly clear that he has done, and continues to do, a very great deal for others.

Mr Chancellor, for his pioneering and transformative work in the field of patient safety, I present to you Dr Peter John Pronovost, for the award of Doctor of Medicine, *honoris causa*.

Citation by Jill Taylor-Roe, 7 December 2016