

THE BACK PAGE Sir Liam Donaldson: looking back without anger

Sir Liam Donaldson is not interested in popularity contests. In his 12 years as Chief Medical Officer for the UK (a post he left in May this year) he has chosen a path—championing patients' rights and insisting on standard setting and accountability—that has made him decidedly unpopular with some of his fellow medical professionals.

"I would go to the wall for the public because that is who I am here to serve," he famously said when facing down one of the many controversies that have dogged his time as the British government's top medical adviser. Colleagues say he is a man for whom the phrase "work is more fun than having fun" was invented but when 'The Back Page' caught up with him during his first full visit to the SAR, he seemed more reflective philosopher than driven workaholic.

"I like Hong Kong very much—as a comparison to other centres everything turns on the design of Hong Kong's economy. Low taxation: that's what the public of Hong Kong expects. That places constraints on what can be provided by the government. The challenge is to provide an efficient fair service with a limited amount of finance."

After years in a largely government-funded, public health service, Sir Liam said he was struck by the extent to which Hong Kong's large private sector affects how medicine is practised here.

"A point of difference that strikes me is that primary care is less well developed in the private sector. More and more patients are being treated in accident and emergency departments. Over the longer term with the growth in chronic disease, private primary care is the place they should be being treated."

Another big difference between the two systems, said Sir Liam, is that in the United Kingdom patients are beginning to have much more say in how medical practice—both hospital and primary care—is delivered.

"In the UK we're placing a lot more emphasis on empowering patients. That doesn't seem to have progressed as far in Hong Kong as it is in the UK...We've tried to bring patients into the work of hospitals, looking at policies and using patients' experience to shape services.

"We are making funding dependent on patients' satisfaction. I think that should happen, if services are rated as very good by patients it should be reflected."

There have been major changes to the way in which doctors are held accountable as well.



Sir Liam Donaldson

Complaints against doctors now go to 'adjudication.' "It's an independent medical tribunal so if there's a complaint against a doctor, it will be more like a court."

Along with that, all doctors have to regularly prove they meet current practice standards to retain their right to practise. Sir Liam admits this did not earn him a lot of fans within the profession.

"There was some resistance but the medical profession accepted the need for higher degrees of accountability... Up until now a doctor could qualify as a consultant and there would not be any check on their competence unless there was a complaint. A patient doesn't know if their doctor is competent."

"Their licenses to practise are reviewed and renewed every five years. Essentially it will rely on accumulation of evidence. So it's a big revolution in clinical accountability."

The UK has had only fifteen Chief medical officers since the post was created in Victorian Britain in 1855. "They tend to be durable," said Sir Liam. His ability to weather storms like one that blew up over an online placement system for junior doctors that left well-qualified candidates jobless, and massive stockpiling of antivirals and vaccines during the H1N1 pandemic, suggests he is made of very stern stuff indeed.

But his defence of patient rights and insistence that indoor smoking be banned has gained him plenty of admirers, too. He will continue to defend patients' rights by taking up the chairmanship of the UK's National Patient Safety Agency, an organisation set up in the wake of a report he is justifiably proud of, *'An Organisation with a Memory'*, which highlighted the importance of patient safety.

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