

THE NEWCASTLE UPON TYNE HOSPITALS NHS FOUNDATION TRUST

COUNCIL OF GOVERNORS

VISIT TO LABORATORY MEDICINE, 24 JUNE 2008

Four Governors met in the RVI Board Room on 24th June. We were greeted by the Clinical Director Dermot Neely and five of his staff who represented the five departments that make up Laboratory Medicine (LM). The five departments are split between the RVI and the Freeman with a small section of haematology at the General. An outline of LM was presented that included the following features.

- 500 staff.
- Low sickness record amongst staff compared to other departments.
- Most LM clinicians are doctors rather than scientists.
- Problems with staff retention in the more junior grades.
- Low level of staff salaries at junior end.
- Three LM departments on RVI site and two at Freeman.
- 85% of LM work is made up with blood tests.
- 70% - 80% of all health care interactions involve pathology investigations.
- Amongst the major European countries, Britain spends least per capita on lab diagnostics.
- A degree of research is undertaken in the LM laboratories, but not a vast quantity.
- Strong accent on quality.

After our Board Room discussions with questions and answers, we toured the three departments on the RVI site. The accommodation allocated to LM was of a good quality and the Departmental Heads suggested that the allocation of space and the furnishing within that space was quite good. The LM departments are currently split across the Newcastle hospitals, but on completion of the new build in March 2009, three of the five departments will be assigned new accommodation, with everything stationed at the RVI. Those sections not going into new accommodation already occupy modern-ish purpose built rooms and can comfortably stay where they are.

To the lay person, there is not a great deal to see when touring LM departments other than a mass of intricately labelled test tubes being conveyed from one area to another, a range of microscopes being peered into by what look like very learned people, some strange looking samples being sliced up for examination and an assortment of machines whirring things about in glass boxes. This is a bit of a glib description, but you know what I mean. We were struck by how conscientious the staff seemed to be, how quiet and composed the departments were and how enthusiastic the departmental heads were in trying to describe their particular sections and what work was done in them. Obviously there was an absence of patients and the normal hurly-burly of hospital life, but the impression was gained of a faculty that undramatically got on with its job in an efficient and purposeful manner. The layperson could understandably be forgiven for being concerned that the constant stream of items coming into the department might all get mixed up. We were assured that the number of mix-ups was negligible despite the volume of items.

Impressions gained over just a couple of hours by such a novice group as ours naturally is a bit circumspect, but overall there was a picture of efficiency, enthusiasm, order, accomplishment and industry. This appeared to be a department that was working well behind the scenes out of the public glare, conscious of the crucial role that it played in helping patients get better. They seemed to enjoy our visit with the chance to showcase their wares. One could not help but be impressed with the scholarly nature of the work and the diligence with which it seemed to be carried out.

Peter Atkinson
Public Governor
8th July 2008