

Speech: Jeremy Hunt: message to NHS staff in support of their excellent work

When I was first made Health Secretary I said it was the biggest privilege of my life, and so it has proved. What I didn't realise then was that it would also become my biggest passion – working in health is not just a job but a vocation.

The election period reinforced more acutely than ever the incredible work of the NHS, particularly the way staff dealt first with the global cyber-attack and then with horrendous terror attacks in Manchester and London.

After the Manchester bombing I met nurses caring for bereaved families with incredible compassion, whilst in London I heard stories of doctors who cycled the length of the city at 2am just because they wanted to help.

These stories speak to a wider truth: NHS staff do an amazing job, often in the most difficult of circumstances. And it is this which brings us all together – our great belief in the NHS, what it stands for and what we believe it can be.

Your compassion, energy, dynamism and total dedication, day in, day out, are truly humbling.

When I look at what the NHS has achieved in recent years, I think you can feel very proud. Despite the financial crash and ensuing period of constrained budgets, today's NHS has some of its highest ever satisfaction ratings, carries out 5,000 more operations a day, has lower MRSA rates than France, Germany or Spain, and sees its highest ever survival rates for cancer, heart attacks and stroke.

One of the biggest expansions of mental health provision in Europe is underway right here, and there's been a transformation in attitudes towards patient safety in the wake of Mid-Staffs. These achievements simply wouldn't have been possible without you, our world-class doctors, nurses, paramedics and everyone else who works every day, across the country, to make the NHS the best it can be.

I am proud that this country was the first to say that no one – rich or poor, young or old – should have to worry about affording good healthcare. Indeed we have made this pledge central to how people right across the world define a civilised nation.

Going forwards, we must continue to focus not just on equity but also on excellence. We need to continue our work on patient safety, continue the transformation of mental health, continue developing new models of care and continue to put as much energy into prevention as into cure.

That's my mission – to support the NHS to become the safest, highest quality health system in the world.

This is not to ignore the fact that difficult issues lie ahead. Money is always going to be a pressure, for instance. But I am confident that, working together, we can unite the whole NHS to deliver the safest, highest quality care anywhere in the world.

I would like to take the opportunity to thank you all for your hard work to make this vision a reality.