

## FROM THE MINISTER OF HEALTH



To: All HSC Staff  
All DoH Staff

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Dear Colleague,

I wanted to write to you at this very challenging time to say how important the work is that you do and how much I appreciate the incredible dedication, skill and desire to serve the public that so many of you exhibit in your daily work.

I do so on behalf of the people of Northern Ireland, who are hugely thankful for the service you provide.

The awarding of the George Cross to the NHS this week - specifically including the health and social care system in NI - is a fitting and moving tribute by HM the Queen, which reflects the high esteem in which you are all held.

In writing this letter, I am very mindful that this is an extremely difficult period for everyone who works in, and cares about, our health service.

Pressures across the system remain severe, more than two years on from the start of the pandemic.

There is also deep and widespread concern over the serious care failings that have been in the public eye in recent weeks.

This includes the early stages of the Muckamore Abbey Hospital public inquiry, with harrowing accounts of patient experiences, and the final report from the Neurology public inquiry.

Sadly, the health and social care system's reputation has been tarnished, and public confidence damaged. Patients have been appallingly let down.

I know staff across the system are as distressed as I am by these failings.

At the same time, we must not forget the commitment, compassion and expertise exhibited every day across every service area and right across NI.

You should be very proud of what you and the contribution each of you make to our community. You are the best of us and as a system we can and will get through this extremely tough period.

While I may well be in the final few months of my time as Health Minister, it is my responsibility to drive forward much needed changes.

Despite the political uncertainties and budgetary pressures, I am committed to doing just that, as demonstrated by recently announced initiatives on health reform, general surgery, waiting list reduction, stroke care and orthopaedics.

Rebuilding our health service is an immense challenge, given the damage inflicted by both the pandemic and more than a decade of underfunding. There are no quick fixes but I am confident we can make things better in time.

Recent announcements also include separate public consultations on Whistleblowing and on Violence and Aggression in the workplace. I encourage each of you to engage with these consultations and make sure your voices are heard.

Both consultations will seek views on how we protect Health and Social Care staff and provide an environment in which they feel safe and confident to carry out their duties and to raise concerns if required.

Protecting patient safety must always be an absolute priority. We need to constantly minimise the risks of bad practice, intervene quickly when things do go wrong, and be open and transparent about it.

The health service also has to get better at listening to patients and patients' families when they are raising concerns.

I believe a workable consensus can be created on enshrining a statutory duty of candour. I intend to engage with fellow UK Health Ministers to see if reform on candour can be taken forward collectively right across the NHS.

There have been unfair suggestions that our health service is wedded to secrecy and defensiveness, and incapable of change.

This is far from the truth. Staff across all levels of the system are committed to serving the public to the very best of their ability. I see that commitment from clinicians, managers, and workers across all parts of health and social care.

It's worth noting that the Neurology Inquiry report highlighted changes that have been introduced since the recall by Belfast Trust to enhance patient safety. The entire HSC system must continue building on these improvements, guided by the Inquiry report.

It should also be remembered that the Neurology Inquiry was commissioned by my Department in 2018, and subsequently converted to a statutory public inquiry by me. That was done to ensure we got to the bottom of what went wrong and what needed to be done.

Similarly, when I ordered the Muckamore inquiry, I was fully aware of how distressing its hearings would be, but also certain that it was the right thing to do. Patients and families need and deserve answers.

I have no doubt we will one day look back on this period in the health service's history and reflect on the sheer scale of the pressures it faced.

I hope we will all be able to say that did our best to put things right - to rebuild, reform and secure a better future.

Thank you for all you do.

Warmest regards

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Robin Swann', written in a cursive style.

**Robin Swann MLA**  
**Minister of Health**