Addressing unconscious bias at St. George’s NHS Foundation Trust

St George’s University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust is based in Tooting in the London Borough of Wandsworth, and serves a population of 1.3 million across southwest London. A large number of services, such as cardiothoracic medicine and surgery, neurosciences and renal transplantation, also cover significant populations from Surrey and Sussex, totalling about 3.5 million people.

The trust employs 8,500 staff at various sites to deliver its services.

Impact of unconscious bias at the Trust

St. George’s Trust has a clear vision to provide quality healthcare services to everyone who needs them, and to make sure that staff are competent, equal and happy in their work. The Trust works hard to ensure that its services ‘promote equality of opportunity, equality of access, and are non-discriminatory to both staff and service users.’

The Trust ensures that the diversity of their staff reflects the diversity that surrounds them. As Jenni Doman, Estates and Facilities Manager explained: “There is a huge variety of different backgrounds of staff that work with us, which makes for a very good workforce in relation to what we do for a living and the people we service in the local community. Our staff is very much a reflection of the communities we serve.” However, evidence from sources like the NHS Staff Survey show that the experiences of black and minority ethnic staff is not as positive as it is for white members of staff. Wendy Brewer, Director of Workforce and Organisational Development at St. George’s believes that unconscious bias might have a role to play in explaining these differential experiences. As she described: “I think it is important for us to tackle all kinds of biases, conscious and unconscious, and I think it is essential to ensure that all our staff are able to flourish to the best of their abilities irrespective of their backgrounds.”

Wendy Brewer and her colleagues who were interviewed for the case study firmly believe that unconscious bias has a direct impact on Trust outcomes. Wendy described how, if not addressed effectively, unconscious bias could have a negative impact on staff engagement, and overall performance of the Trust. She highlights the growing body of research which shows that staff engagement is crucial to positive outcomes for patients and staff. For instance, Trusts which have higher staff engagement report lower hospital mortality rates and increased patient satisfaction. Staff engagement is also linked to lower absence rates amongst staff and increased health and well-being at work.

Jane Attrill, Head of Rehabilitation Services explained how unconscious bias could impact the kind of treatment and care received by patients and how different staff groups interact with each other. For Lynette Clarke, Renal Service Manager at the Trust, unconscious bias has an impact on how the Trust recruits staff. Jenni Doman explained why it is important to make staff realise that due to biases people have “everybody is not treated the same...” and that “it is important to recognise differences and respect their diversity.”

Training on unconscious bias

In 2014, the Trust commissioned Dr. Jude Smith Rachele of Abundant Sun to carry out a training programme for their staff on unconscious bias. Jude runs highly interactive and ‘entertaining’

“Everybody has got a bias. It is about making yourself aware of the biases you have, understanding how you can manage them, how it could transform to your everyday work and how it effects the people around you....This isn’t just about staff. It is about the way we treat patients, relatives, visitors and interactions out in the community.”

Stephanie Sweeney, Head of Nursing
workshops, which include concrete action planning to help staff take back the learning to their current roles. As she described: “We have a lot of fun - that is the most important thing. It is a lot of honesty from our part, sharing the imperfections and biases we have as professionals....It is injecting an element of realism so that people feel safe to be honest and to take the time to explore the issue and how it impacts them.”

For Dr. Jude Smith Rachele, the first step in tackling unconscious bias is making people more aware of their own biases. As she explained: “The impact of bias is too detrimental. What we [Abundant Sun] do is very much designed to help increase the awareness of the unconscious behaviours in relation to discrimination, bullying, harassment and stereotyping and create a more inclusive work environment where people can thrive.”

The Trust carried out a pilot session to introduce some staff members to the training programme. As initial feedback from the training session was very positive, they decided to roll it out to the senior management team, Band 8s and Band 7s. Although some staff members were initially apprehensive about being part of the session, the openness and ‘vibrancy’ of the trainer [Jude] put them at ease and helped create a safe environment where views could be shared and discussed. As Jane Attrill explained: “It [training programme] helped to bring out people’s personal experiences, which was very helpful because we all have things in our own lives that people don’t know the impact of or how they impact them at work. The trainer was very good at bringing these things to the fore.”

This was echoed by some of the interviewees who said that although there were no follow-up training sessions, they felt that the training programme had a long-term impact on their thinking due to the trainer and the nature of its delivery. As Lynn Clarke described: “People say, ‘no I am not prejudiced, I have no biases’ – but by the end of the session they realise that they are.”

**Impact of the training programme**

The immediate feedback from the training programme has been very positive.

Senior managers at the Trust are seen talking about the training programme and how it has made them aware of their biases. Those that have not had the opportunity to be part of the session are keen to go in it. As Lynn Clarke explained: “The training programme helps you to stop and think. When you are dealing with a particular situation, it is not about making an assumption that somebody is going to react in this way because they look this way, dress this way or due to their gender – it does make you take stock and think.”

For Jenni Doman, the training session was an opportunity to take a step back from day to day management activities and “think quite deeply about your own feelings and how it impacts you at work.” She further added that in her experience, since the training programme, there have been distinct changes in behaviours of some of those that have been part of the session, how they manage their teams and day to day business activities. As she described: “It doesn’t matter how good a manger you are, you have to sometimes sit back and have that time to just think about
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things. But we don’t necessarily always have time to do that. But the training programme has given us the opportunity to do so despite our busy schedules. I now think about how I am managing things differently given the learning from the training session.”

This was echoed by some of her colleagues who said that the training programme helped them to be analytical and “think twice” before they make any decisions and ensure that they are creating a transparent, inclusive and consistent work environment. As Subi Menon, Matron at the Trust explained: “It has definitely made people think. I am not part of the recruitment process, but whenever my ward managers recruits someone new, I can talk to her about it and understand how the decision was made. So there is a thought process involved.”

However, the Trust currently does not have a system in place to ‘measure’ the direct impact of the training programme. Jenni Doman believes that it would be difficult to ‘quantify’ the effect of such programmes “unless you are shadowing the person [who has been part of the training session] day in and day out and see how they behave and whether there have been any changes from before.” She further added that a ward or a department could be performing well due to a number of factors and it would be difficult to link the positive outcomes just to the training programme.

This view was echoed by Wendy Brewer, who said that although feedback from the training programme has been very positive, the Trust cannot see a connection yet in terms of the training session and change in outcomes for individuals. As she explained: “I can’t see that it is impacting on our employee relations statistics for example. While I can say that I have observed and heard senior managers talk more about how they are aware of the impact on other people, it is still very early days.” Wendy believes that it is essential that the Trust establish an ‘evaluative link’ between people who have been on the training programme and what their outcomes are in their areas to understand its impact.

Nevertheless, interviewees firmly believe that the training programme is a contributing factor to making things better at the Trust and reinforce its values and vision. But, there is a feeling amongst those that participated in the case study that unless everyone at the Trust has had the opportunity to be part of the programme, it would be difficult to recognise the extent to which the session has made a difference to staff behaviours and decision-making skills. As Jane Attrill explained: “In my staff group, I can’t think of any examples where I’d be able to say to you quite clearly that training has made a difference…but I will qualify that by saying I don’t know how many people have attended it….But in terms of a contributing factor to general improvement in terms of Trust values, training has been very helpful.”

**Strengthening the training programme**

Although training on unconscious bias at the Trust is in its early stages, staff have suggested various ways in which it could be strengthened further.

The Trust presently carries out training for senior management teams, Band 8s and Band 7s, however, staff we interviewed for the case study firmly believe that, to be truly effective, the training programme should be made available to all staff irrespective of seniority and staff groups. As Lynn Clarke explained: “Gaps to me [in terms of the training programme] is to ensure that everybody goes on it. Everyone from the executive and management team right the way down to porters, cleaning and catering staff….This is the only way you are going to get everybody singing from the same hymn sheet.” Some members further added that if and when the Trust decides to roll out the training programme to all staff, the content will have to be tailored to the requirements of the various bands, staff groups and their roles.
Presently, staff at the Trust can choose whether to be part of the training programme. However, the overwhelming view of those we interviewed for the case study is that the training has to be made mandatory. As Wendy Brewer explained: “There are couple of things we need to do to strengthen the programme further. Firstly, it needs to be made mandatory.”

Some staff members said that just training on unconscious bias would not change some of the strong views people have. Stephanie Sweeney believes that the training programme should add to the vision and overall organisational and governance plan of the Trust while providing staff with forums to discuss “the big questions and help tackle some very specific behaviours if they are biased.” As she described: “I think we need to probably look at how we can live feedback on the course and devise a way of capturing how we could put that into practice….I think it would be good if we are able to have a seminar session for a couple of hours or a roundtable with HR and share experiences and discuss what we have done that might help to get it [the training session] out there.”

This view was echoed by Jenni Doman who said that HR need to take an active role in evaluating the training programme and ensure that it doesn’t become a “tick box exercise” or “just another training course.” As she described: “HR team can get back [to the trainees] and say ‘right, so you have had your training on unconscious bias, what have you done differently, give us some examples’ and then feed it back in some kind of review through the managers in relation to leadership development.”

There were also suggestions from staff members that to maintain momentum and reinforce the learning, the training programme needs to be ongoing and not just a one off exercise. As Tsening Chodon, Ward Manager at the Trust explained: “I think we should have regular training sessions because we went in [to the training programme] as clean slates and now something’s drawn on it. We need to come back in six to seven months’ time to see how much has been retained on the slate and how much has gone into practice. So feedback from members who attended the training session on how they have done and how staff turnover in that department has been since the training session would certainly help.”

Finally, some of the staff members felt that the Trust could make better use of their internal communication systems to publicise the training programme more. Although the Trust sends out regular emails to staff about dates for upcoming training sessions, some staff members feel that sharing information about who has already been part of the session would encourage others to willingly take part.

Challenges

There is a recognition across the Trust that there will continue to be significant changes over the next few years which could have an impact on the effectiveness of the training programme.

Cuts to the Trust’s budget has meant that staff are currently facing various service pressures. As Jenni Doman explained: “In a state of financial anxiety, you are not always going to get very interesting returns. You will get people that are not bothered to do this. You can only encourage them to be part of it [training programme] but if people don’t want to do it, you can’t force them.” Stephanie Sweeney echoed this view by saying pressures on staff keep going up as the population around them keeps rising and that unless the training programme becomes part of everyone’s Personal Development Plan (PDP), it would be difficult to make it mandatory for all. As one of the interviewees explained: “I think it is difficult with mandatory training because there is so much that needs to be done each day at the Trust. Obviously for clinical colleagues, there is also clinical training and developments in addition to the non-clinical and professional and leadership development.”
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However, Jenni Doman thinks that by giving enough notice to staff about potential training dates, it would help the managers in organising their staff and help set some time aside in their rotas if they wish to go on the training programme. As she described: “Our clinics are booked 10-12 weeks in advance and we cannot cancel clinics and take people out to go on training... Certainly my feedback was that we need to have more notice or have dates booked through the year. So in all departments and services, they could decide that a number of their staff could go and they could plan when people are going to be absent in order to attend the training.”

Jane Attrill further added that being able to run training programmes in venues other than St. George’s would make it easier for staff that are not based at the Trust to attend the training sessions.

Role of leadership and line managers

Wendy Brewer, Director of Workforce and Organisational Development at the Trust firmly believes that the senior leadership team plays a fundamental role in setting the tone and embedding the learning from the training programme within the organisation. As she described: “If leaders don’t change the way we behave, there is no point in running training programmes.” This view was echoed by those that were interviewed for the case study. Leaders and the senior management team at the Trust have already been part of the training programme and are seen to be leading by example. Some leaders also take an active role in publicising the training programme and encourage their team members to attend the sessions.

Line managers at the Trust also play an important role in creating work environments where everyone is treated fairly and consistently. Senior managers interviewed for the case study felt that the Trust made the right decision in commissioning a training programme to address unconscious bias and that it is important they had the right tools in place to make themselves and their team members aware of the biases they have.

Key learnings

Training on unconscious bias has potential to change behaviours if it is delivered in the right way and has inclusion for all staff and not seen as a tick box exercise.

Training in isolation with no strategic vision, no sustainable plan, and no engagement from leadership will not change behaviours.

The trainer is key to an engaging training session. It is essential that the trainer creates an environment where individuals feel safe to share their views and opinions.

Evaluating the training programme, in terms of its impact is crucial. Staff who have been part of the training programme need to be invited to take part in a forum to share learnings and discuss how the session has helped them in their current role, and what they are doing differently from before.

Leadership and the management team need to lead by example and take an active role in embedding the learning from the training programme within the organisation.