

FORMER CHAT SHOW HOST EXPLAINS HOW FEAR OF AGEING AFFECTS CARE

Dignity ambassador Sir Michael Parkinson tells Adele Waters what inspired him to make a stand

Everyone in society has a contribution to make to improving dignity in care – not just nurses.

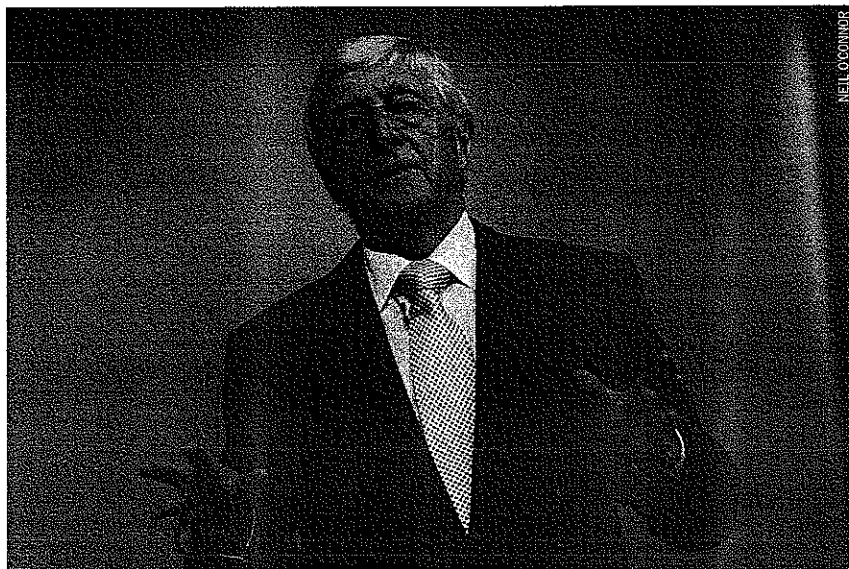
That was the key message from Sir Michael Parkinson when he addressed last week's annual RCN congress in Harrogate.

He said society needed to begin a debate about the values it places on growing old because those values affected the way older people were treated in the care system.

'When we consider how we can improve the way people are treated, we should look not at nurses but at ourselves. We should ask ourselves, 'why are we so terrified of growing old? Why do we make less of people, by shoving them in a corner until they die? What is wrong with a wrinkle?'

The former chat show host became a dignity ambassador for the Department of Health a year ago, and since then he has made a handful of visits to hospitals and care homes across the country, meeting nurses and learning about the obstacles to compassionate care.

In an interview with *Nursing Standard* afterwards, he insisted his role did not make him a care expert. 'I am an outsider looking



Sir Michael Parkinson speaking at RCN congress last week

in – I am not here to tell nurses how to do their job.'

Sir Michael said his personal experience had inspired him to champion higher care standards for all patients.

He spoke tenderly about his late mother Freda Rose and how her final years were plagued by dementia. She died two years ago, aged 96, but he remembers feeling 'tremendous guilt' due to witnessing varying standards in the care she received. Sometimes her care was 'careless', he said, at other times 'over-familiar' or of the 'head-patting' kind, which frustrated his mother greatly.

Social influence

He said there were many factors that affected the way care was regarded by society, such as increased social mobility and the break-up of the traditional family unit.

But he said valuing caring was important and he branded the

average salary of nurses 'appalling'. 'Yorkshire cricketers get paid about £100,000 a year, but not many nurses get that I wouldn't have thought.

When he was told the average nurse's salary, he said: '£24,000? Now that is appalling. It means we rely on the nature of people who want to go into nursing to do it no matter what. We have done that for too long. We should make it a priority – I mean that sincerely.

'I have always been a keen supporter of nurses being paid what they are worth. But you tell me what a nurse is worth – is it £100,000 or £200,000? They do a very important job in our society.'

He admits he would have loved to have interviewed, Florence Nightingale: 'She inspired not just one generation of nurses, but generations after her. When you think about what she did... what an interview that would be' **NS**

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