

Leading in Adversity and Complex Times

Reflections from the October 2025 WHLNet Global Broadcast

In October 2025, the World Health Leadership Network (WHLNet) convened healthcare leaders, academics, and practitioners from around the world for a broadcast on **“Leading in Adversity and Complex Times.”** Against a backdrop of global uncertainty, system pressures, and workforce fatigue, the session explored how leadership rooted in compassion, integrity, and staff wellbeing can help healthcare systems not only endure but evolve.

Hosted virtually, the event featured three interactive breakout sessions: *Leading with Compassion*, *Leading with Integrity*, and *Leading to Support Staff Wellbeing*. Participants from more than twenty countries contributed examples, insights, and lived experiences of leading through challenge and change.

Leading with Compassion

The first breakout, co-facilitated by **Dr Vijay Agarwal** (India) and **Bill Tholl** (OC; Order of Canada), opened with a reminder that compassion is not a luxury, it is essential to patient safety and high-reliability care. As Dr Agarwal reflected, *“To really promote patient safety, I think compassion is one thing which is hugely needed in leadership.”*

Drawing on his experience transforming Indian hospitals into learning organizations, Dr Agarwal described compassion as a leadership competency that demands courage and humility: listening deeply, responding constructively, and remaining present even when solutions are not obvious.

Bill Tholl reinforced this point, noting that compassion must coexist with accountability: *“Compassionate leaders take the blame when things go sideways—and they share the credit when things go well.”* He emphasised that true compassion in leadership means protecting dignity and trust, especially in times of crisis or failure.

Participants explored how compassionate leadership can translate into everyday practices—from private, supportive handling of staff errors to policy decisions that uphold fairness and empathy at a systems level. The consensus: compassion is both a moral stance and a strategic advantage for resilient, high-performing healthcare systems.

Leading with Integrity

The second breakout, led by **Dr Lorena Cifuentes Águila** (Chile) and **Professor Neil E. Grunberg** (USA), focused on integrity as the moral compass of healthcare leadership. Dr Cifuentes observed that, *“It’s so important to promote a culture of integrity, because integrity is the cornerstone of trust—and it has a big impact on everything, even on patients’ outcomes.”*

She shared her experience guiding postgraduate education through Chile’s pandemic years, where transparent communication and moral consistency, built trust among staff navigating

uncertainty. Professor Grunberg extended the conversation, reminding participants that, *“Integrity is not innate—it’s something that can and should be developed through mentorship, feedback, and self-reflection.”*

The session explored how integrity can be fostered within teams and organizations: through reflective practice, courageous conversations, and performance systems that reward ethical consistency as much as technical competence. Participants agreed that while rules and codes of conduct provide structure, the real work of integrity happens in relationships—between colleagues, patients, and institutions.

Leading to Support Staff Wellbeing

In the third breakout, **Dr Andrea Basualdo Allende** (Chile) and **Professor Anne Matlow** (Canada) turned attention to staff wellbeing as both an ethical imperative and an organizational necessity. Dr Andrea Basualdo Allende summarised this succinctly: *“Leaders must be attentive to the human side of healthcare: listening, supporting, and ensuring that wellbeing is a shared responsibility.”*

She highlighted how wellbeing initiatives must move beyond individual resilience to address the environments in which people work: psychological safety, just culture, and supportive leadership. Professor Matlow built on this by emphasising the relational foundations of safety and trust: *“Creating psychological safety begins with humility and curiosity—asking, not telling.”*

Both facilitators underlined that caring for the workforce is inseparable from caring for patients. A healthy, respected workforce is more able to deliver safe, high-quality care, innovate, and sustain compassion under pressure. Participants shared examples of how leaders can assess wellbeing, balance competing pressures, and advocate for systemic change while maintaining empathy and authenticity.

Common Threads: Humanity, Trust, and Learning

Across all three sessions, three common themes emerged: **humanity, trust, and learning**. Humanity reminds leaders that compassion, integrity, and wellbeing are not “soft skills” but *system skills* essential to effective healthcare. Trust emerges from consistency, moral courage, and respect for others’ experiences. And learning, personal, organizational, and collective, enables leaders to adapt in complexity and to transform adversity into improvement.

As one participant observed, leadership in healthcare today demands both heart and head: the ability to make evidence-based decisions while upholding values that protect the dignity and wellbeing of others. These qualities so vividly illustrated through the WHLNet discussions are central to the future of healthcare leadership worldwide.

Continuing the Conversation

The WHLNet broadcast series continues to create a space where global healthcare leaders, scholars, and practitioners exchange ideas, share challenges, and strengthen collective capacity for leading in complexity. Through virtual collaboration, WHLNet fosters an international community that learns not just *about* leadership, but *from* one another's lived realities.

As the October 2025 session demonstrated, adversity can be a catalyst for clarity. Compassion, integrity, and care for wellbeing form the enduring architecture of leadership that sustains both people and systems.