Open letter to Dr Bruno Holthof

Dear Bruno,

I hope that you don't mind this letter being written to you?

I know that you are new to the UK and Oxfordshire and I'm sure that much of the medical and political landscape is a bit different to what you expected but I don't think that you have really understood what a local hospital means to its population.

North Oxfordshire is rural, the distances are large and the transport infrastructure is poor. People do not want to travel more than they have to. Oxford may be a centre of academic excellence but that is not of any interest to the majority of people who just want good local healthcare.

Destroying the local hospital rips out the heart of the local community and destroys more than you would ever imagine.

But even if you are not interested in what the population of Banbury want, or need, then surely you should be interested in the economics.

What you are proposing makes no economic sense for Banbury but nor does it make economic sense for Oxford or the region. Moving patients who do not wish, or need, to be moved costs far more to the community and the wider economy than any savings that, you have imagined, might be achieved.

Establishing a fully functioning district general hospital in the north of the county would not only be the best for Banbury but it would also, undoubtedly, be the best for Oxford. It is so clear that Oxford cannot cope with what it currently has and would struggle with any more. This has already been amply demonstrated by the difficulties that the general surgical and trauma services already have in coping with the volume of patients in Oxford.

A model that distributed patients more evenly between the two hospitals would allow a fully functional unit at two centres to the benefit of both. Oxford needs Banbury to be a fully functional hospital in order for Oxford to function as the tertiary centre that it wishes to be.

By the way Banbury is not a community hospital it is a district general hospital. This means that it needs a fully functional accident and emergency department, acute general medicine, acute general surgery, paediatrics, maternity and trauma. A diagnostic centre is not a district general hospital.

Destroying the Horton Hospital will cripple the John Radcliffe. If you won't listen to the needs of the community of North Oxfordshire maybe you will listen to the cool economics and your own senior clinicians.
Perhaps it is time to listen to the wider community in Banbury who wish to run their hospital rather than the Empire Builders in Oxford who wish to destroy the north of the county but are likely to succeed in ruining everything at what economic and personal cost.

No doubt you will shortly leave for another hospital post. Your current plans will please nobody. It will seem to management in Oxford that much has been spent in Banbury and that the natives of the North are not appreciative. The population of Banbury will feel they have lost the hospital and the patients who have to travel to the “diagnostic centre” or south to Oxford will resent the journey.

Perhaps the question you need to ask is are you visionary and can see a future that will ultimately result in cost-effective high-quality healthcare for the Oxfordshire hospitals or will you be seen as the man who destroyed a much loved hospital with the resulting worse healthcare for the whole of Oxfordshire?

At the moment you look like the latter but we live in hope?
Dear author,

Of course I do not mind receiving your letter, in fact I am pleased to have the opportunity to reply and will do my best to address the concerns you have raised.

It is correct that I am new to the UK, having lived here now for a year. I have enjoyed meeting many new people both in my role as Chief Executive of Oxford University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust and personally, as I’m sure any newcomer to Oxfordshire would. Over the year, I have spent time at the Horton General Hospital and with its staff and patients, and I can reassure you that the importance of this excellent hospital to the community is very clear to me.

There are of course differences in the medical and political landscape between the UK and my native Belgium but there are similarities in humanity that cross cultural boundaries and language differences when it comes to the care which we all, as people, want for our families, friends and communities.

I am completely focused on how the Horton can continue to provide the best care and treatment for the community it serves, while also being realistic that it is an older hospital that needs updating to secure its long-term future.

Firstly I would like to assure you that there are no plans by the Trust to close the Horton General Hospital. The opposite is the case as we are planning the rebuild and refurbishment of parts of the hospital facilities to provide a general hospital fit for the 21st century in the place of the old, dilapidated current estate. Parts of the Horton now cost more to maintain than they would to completely renovate. This to me certainly does not make economic sense.

You will all be aware of the great financial pressures and staffing issues that the NHS faces and you will know this is not unique to Banbury, it is a national issue. This means changes need to be made to a smaller general hospital like the Horton to secure a sustainable future for it and its community. Part of our vision is that many more tens of thousands of patients a year can be seen at the Horton General Hospital instead of at our hospitals in Oxford.

It is my ambition to focus the time, energy and resources of the Trust on finding the best option to develop a new and improved NHS hospital facility at the Horton. This is not a project which will happen overnight, but I am committed to making sure it does happen. Plans are at an early stage and still being worked on. Later in the year, the Oxfordshire Clinical Commissioning Group will lead a public consultation which will involve the people of Banbury as fully as possible in any proposed changes.

We have worked very closely with our staff, and also with many local groups as our plans have developed, including public meetings. I am committed to maintaining this open dialogue and my door is always open to thoughts and suggestions from staff, patients and the wider community.
My drive and purpose every day is to secure the best possible health care for communities across Oxfordshire and this clearly includes north Oxfordshire and the wider Banburyshire community around the Horton.

*Dr Bruno Holthof, Chief Executive Oxford University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust*