

BME trailblazers in the NHS

Lord Victor Adebowale

Equality, diversity & human rights:
BME trailblazer series

*Celebrating the 65th
anniversary of the NHS*



On 5 July 2013, the NHS will celebrate its 65th birthday. The NHS is the single largest employer of black and minority ethnic (BME) people in England and has been heavily dependent upon the services of professionals from all parts of the globe since its inception.

In the run up to this significant event, the NHS Employers organisation is profiling a number of leading BME individuals, all of whom are trailblazers – pioneers, leaders and experts in their respective fields of healthcare. Together, they have blazed a trail, inspiring future generations, and helped to shape and influence developments in clinical and management practice during the last 65 years. We hope you will join us in saluting the achievements of these exceptional individuals.

Lord Victor Adebowale, Baron Adebowale of Thornes in the County of West Yorkshire

Bus drivers and hospital porters top the list of heroes for Lord Victor Adebowale. The down-to-earth chief executive of Turning Point, a health and social care organisation delivering NHS services with a turnover of about £100 million, says it's the people he works with, especially those who engage with the public and who "give a damn", who really inspire him.

Turning Point offers services and support to people with complex needs, such as mental health issues, alcohol and drugs misuse and learning disabilities. Victor has been chief executive of the social enterprise since 2001, which employs over 2,600 staff in over 200 locations. He is also a member of the NHS Future Forum on integrated services and sits on the board of NHS England.

Growing up in Wakefield as one of four children, Victor attributes his strong work ethic to his Nigerian parents and his passion for the NHS to his mother's experience as a nurse.

He realised in his early teens that he wanted to do "something that mattered." One of Victor's first jobs was as a road sweeper. Although the job was quite different to what he is doing now, it served as a good grounding in learning about people: "if you want to know about human nature, be a street sweeper".

"Lord Victor Adebowale shares my passion for the NHS and is an individual who is truly motivated to help others. He heads an admirable organisation that keeps patients with complex needs at the very heart of the service. It's an absolute privilege to know and work with him."

The Rt Hon. Lord Hunt of Kings Heath OBE



“That’s what it’s all about: turning lives around. And I really mean that. The day I get bored with that is the day I’ll pack it in.”

Did you know?

1. He plays the saxophone.
2. He is learning to play the ukulele.
3. He collects comic books.

From working in estate management, Victor went on to work in the housing association sector, rising quickly through the ranks to become the regional director of Ujima, Britain’s largest black-led housing association. In 1990, still in his 20s, he became the director of the Alcohol Recovery Project and, five years later, he was appointed chief executive officer of youth homelessness charity Centrepont.

Victor received a CBE in 2000 for services to the New Deal, for unemployed and homeless young people. A year later, he became one of the first People’s Peers and was given the title of Baron Adebowale of Thornes in the County of West Yorkshire. He sits in the House of Lords as a crossbench peer, advising government on a range of topics such as mental health, learning disability and the role of the voluntary sector. In spite of his title, Victor wears his peerage very lightly. He says of himself: “I’m a six foot black guy from Wakefield who isn’t rich, didn’t go to Eton or Oxbridge and isn’t a lawyer. What the hell am I doing here?”

In line with his rather modest view of himself, he doesn’t consider himself to be a role model. His own heroes are the people on the frontline who go above and beyond to help others.

“There was a guy who drove the bus on my street every day. He was a great member of the community. He was reliable, helpful and just as much of a role model as someone like me,” he says.

“The hospital porter who stops to ask the name of a patient and then finds a nurse to tell them that something’s not right with the patient, and he will continue to badger them until the patient is comfortable... There’s a Nelson Mandela in all those people.”

He describes the NHS as a “powerful symbol of what human beings can achieve” and sees Turning Point very much as part of the NHS, running numerous services such as needle exchanges, talking therapies, family care and GP surgeries.

“We don’t see ourselves as separate or in competition. We are free at the point of contact. We don’t have shareholders or have distribution of dividends. We deliver services in exactly the same way and we value the NHS as a partner.”

As well as substantial involvement with the NHS, Victor is an Honorary Senior Fellow in the Health Services Management Centre at the University of Birmingham and a non-executive director for THP-Innovate, a health IT consultancy. He is also a commissioner on the UK Commission for Employment and Skills.

In terms of a legacy, Victor prefers to concentrate on the present: “I like to think I’m quite focused on being in the here and now. I don’t really think about legacy. I like to leave places better than when I found them... I hope I leave a smile.”