AM: You’ve talked about the NHS being at a great level of stress. How bad are things, in your view?

RF: Well, I think they are pretty bad. We’ve got a virtual storm of financial pressures, increased demand, difficulties finding staffing, and pressure on the service to continue delivering. And some of that sounds quite familiar, as it was those were the conditions pertaining at the time of mid-Staffordshire. Things have changed since then, so the very fact that we’re talking about this today the way that we are, the very fact that the Secretary of State says things are unacceptable, shows that there’s a greater level of transparency. So people are talking about the problems in a way that they weren’t before. But the system is running extremely hot at the moment and it’s only working at all because of the almost superhuman efforts of the staff of the NHS, and it can’t carry on like that indefinitely without something badly going, or risking going badly wrong.

AM: Now, to remind people, the mid-Staffs scandal was utterly horrific: people lying in their own faeces, hundreds of people potentially dying earlier than they might have done, awful, awful tales of kind of cruelty and neglect. When you say that we might see another mid-Staffs, isn’t that overdoing it a bit?

RF: Well, I think, as I say, that there are better safeguards in place in terms of transparency and greater inspection, so I would like to think that before we got to that stage that the problems would come to light. But I think the risks increase all the time, that the pressure keeps on getting worse, and that now more and more chief executives say they can’t meet their financial targets. More and more hospitals haven’t got staff that they planned to
have. And things are being done about all these things, but the faster the engine has to run, the more effort that has to be made in repairing it, the greater the risks.

AM: We seem to be stuck in a kind of spiral with these stories, which is the government says we’re putting in enough money, and then there’s another scandal and another crisis and we go round and round and round. Do you think we are now at the point as a country where we need to think about a different way of funding the NHS, a more consistent way of looking at the funding of the NHS so we don’t have these recurring crises?

RF: Well, I don’t think the problems are entirely due to money. Money can provide a sort of sticking plaster, and the history of the NHS has been that over a number of years whenever there’s a crisis more money is put in. But we carry on doing things in the same way. But we also need to revisit how we actually deliver the service. So, for instance, adult social care is also in a state of crisis and if we don’t change the way we do things, if we, for instance, don’t find better ways of avoiding people having to come to hospital, we’re going to carry on repeating these crises.

AM: Can I ask you about the condition of whistleblowers? Because a lot of whistleblowers feel that in your reports you didn’t give them enough safeguards against, frankly, bullying bosses who didn’t want their stories to come out, and the rest of us kind of depend upon whistleblowers to tell us sometimes what’s going on inside the NHS.

RF: Well, I made proposals, the intention of which is to make the raising of concerns utterly normal and welcome within the service, and those reforms, I think, are getting more embedded. So for instance, we now have a network of free and speak up guardians round almost all hospitals. They all should have one by now. To whom people can go when they have a problem about raising
concerns. There’s a national guardian to ensure that the network gets the support that it needs. But you know, the problems are not going to be solved simply by helping, important as it is, individual whistleblowers, we need to make sure that the staff who currently say that things are going wrong are listened to. Because they have the solutions often to the problems that are met on a day-to-day basis. And I do believe that is absolutely necessary.

(ends)