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NHS ‘failing whistleblowers’ with return-to-work plan

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August 21 2017, 12:01am, The Times



A nationwide pilot scheme will offer career coaching, financial advice and mediation to staff who have suffered after raising concerns SOLI SCARFF/GETTY IMAGES

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A new NHS scheme to help whistleblowers back into employment has been criticised as a “PR vehicle” before its launch.

The nationwide pilot scheme, with a £100,000 budget, will offer career coaching, financial advice and mediation to staff who have suffered as a result of raising concerns.

Sir Malcolm Grant, chairman of NHS England, said: “It is simply inexcusable that talented, experienced staff should be lost to the NHS as the result of raising the legitimate concerns that help the health service improve.”

In a review into whistleblowing in the health service published in 2015, commissioned by Jeremy Hunt, Sir Robert Francis, QC, said: “Some individuals who have raised concerns experience severe difficulties when seeking re-employment in the health service.”

He said the NHS had “a moral obligation” to support whistleblowers who lost their jobs.

However, in the two years since, whistleblowers have repeatedly claimed that new jobs in the NHS have not been forthcoming. The pilot for primary care staff, which will run until March, is being led by Working Transitions, a private company. Those taking part will be given an occupational health assessment and assigned a coach who will support them.

Julie Bailey founded the group Cure the NHS to expose the Mid Staffordshire scandal, where frail elderly patients were left without food or water after bosses became obsessed with cutting costs.

She said: “Most whistleblowers need more than guidance and advice on how to return to work, which is what the proposed NHS England whistleblowing scheme offers them.

Very often whistleblowers are seen as troublemakers within the NHS

“Ideally they need a real employment scheme that is adequately funded, one that acknowledges that harm has been caused to a person that was doing the right thing. The scheme needs to be one that ensures that a person is given a comparable position to one that they had to leave. Furthermore, they may need support to return to work and a guarantee they are safe to return.

“Very often whistleblowers are seen as troublemakers within the NHS. Organisations need incentives to bring them into their organisations. Sadly the scheme addresses none of this.”

Minh Alexander, a psychiatrist who raised concerns about patient deaths at a trust in Cambridgeshire, said: “It would be a step in the right direction if it had been handled properly, but it hasn’t. I have little confidence that this amounts to much more than a public relations exercise by the Department of Health and its organs.”

NHS England said that the campaign group Patients First had helped them design the pilot, which will be evaluated by Liverpool John Moores University.

Kim Holt, a paediatrician who raised concerns about a clinic where Baby P was treated and later founded Patients First, said: “It is a scandal that there is a large number of NHS staff unable to return to their workplace, caused by victimisation after challenging their seniors about patient care. I wholly support a scheme that attempts to redress the balance.

“These people should be offered alternative posts and support to get their careers back on track, if that is what they want. There is a huge amount of work to do to value those who are pushing for openness and are focused on patient care above other demands.”