

Open letter 26 April 2016 to the Council of Governors, St. George's University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust

Dear Sirs,

### **Ms Paula Vasco-Knight and Fit and Proper Person issues**

My name is Clare Sardari. I am an Organisational Development Professional by background and one of two NHS whistleblower's from Torbay in South Devon. In 2012 we raised concerns of nepotism by Ms Paula Vasco-Knight, who was then Chief Executive of South Devon Healthcare NHS Trust. We suffered reprisal and were both dismissed. In January 2014 an Employment Tribunal concluded that the trust run by Ms Vasco-Knight had covered up the nepotism and victimised us for whistleblowing.

Sir Robert Francis, who led the MidStaffs Public Inquiry, responded to the outcome of the Employment Tribunal with this strong criticism of the trust:

*"It is important that no tolerance is afforded to oppressive managerial behaviour of the sort identified only last week by an employment tribunal in the South West, which victimises staff who raise honestly held concerns."*

*"Every such case is damaging to the confidence of other staff who are contemplating raising concerns. It is clear there is much to do in this area."*

Ms Vasco-Knight stepped down as Chief Executive following these events. However, in September 2015 I was deeply shocked to hear that senior figures in the NHS had welcomed Ms Vasco-Knight back into the fold and that she had been employed at St. Georges as an interim Chief Operating Officer. I was even more astonished this week to hear that she had been promoted to Acting Chief Executive.

NHS Trusts are legally obliged to ensure that their directors are of good character and meet the Fit and Proper Person test, and under Regulation 5 the Care Quality Commission (CQC) is supposed to ensure that NHS Trusts do this effectively. I struggle to see how the

board of St. Georges and the CQC could come to a reasonable conclusion that Ms Vasco-Knight is a Fit and Proper Person to be in charge of people's lives in the light of serious criticism of her conduct by the Tribunal and its comments about her as a witness. It seems to me that only a tokenistic, diluted attempt could have been made at the Fit and Proper Person test.

Indeed, information from the Trust shows that both St. George's staff and governors expressed concerns about Ms Vasco-Knight's appointment. It also shows that the governors were only given a list of documents relating to the whistleblowing case, and not the actual documents themselves.

The way Ms Vasco-Knight and South Devon Healthcare NHS Foundation trust dealt with me was personally devastating, and I am now unemployable. Prior to that, I had served in the NHS and Local Government for over 25 years. I truly do not want anyone else to experience what I endured, and I am very concerned for staff and patients at St. George's. St. George's is under pressure and it is crucial that staff can raise concerns with confidence and resolve them safely. However, I do not know how trust staff will have confidence to raise concerns in the light of Ms Vasco-Knight's appointment and promotion to the top job.

The praise given to NHS whistleblowers for their courage is only lip service if the senior managers who harm them are quickly recycled back into the NHS, as if nothing ever happened.

I ask for the sake of staff and patients that the Council of Governors now examines all the relevant documents and robustly scrutinises the evidence that the St. George's trust board claims shows that Ms Vasco-Knight is a Fit and Proper Person. I am happy to be contacted for more information.

Yours sincerely,

Clare Sardari

cc Sir Robert Francis QC  
Health Committee

Jane Ellison MP Battersea, Balham and Wandsworth  
Rt. Hon Sadiq Khan MP Tooting  
Care and Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee Wandsworth  
Council