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Disgraced CQC chief Dame Jo Williams given top job at children's hospital

Chris Smyth, Health Editor

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Dame Jo Williams tried to dismiss a whistleblower from the NHS watchdog SARAH ROBERTSON

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A woman who presided over incompetence and cover-up at the NHS watchdog has been appointed head of a leading children's hospital.

Whistleblowers reacted with disbelief when Dame Jo Williams was made chairwoman of Alder Hey Children's NHS Foundation Trust, which said that she was perfect for the job.

She had been chairwoman of the Care Quality Commission (CQC) at a time when some of its own staff testified that it was incapable of spotting poor care because they were filling in forms instead of carrying out inspections.

She resigned in 2012 after she had commissioned a private psychiatric assessment on Kay Sheldon, a whistleblower whom she had tried to get dismissed. Dame Jo apologised for making detailed allegations of mental illness to MPs about Ms Sheldon and was rebuked by an employment tribunal judge for criticising Amanda Pollard, another whistleblower, in an email to all staff.

After she left, the CQC descended into chaos and a report concluded that during her time in charge it had covered up its own failure to investigate the Morecambe Bay hospitals scandal, in which a mother and 11 babies died as a result of dysfunctional care.

David Prior, her successor, said that things were so bad that patients could not trust the watchdog. “There’s an old saying ‘the fish rots from the head’ — the board and the executive were totally dysfunctional.” Lord Prior of Brampton is now chairman of NHS England.

Last night Ms Pollard said that Dame Jo’s appointment to the £40,000-a-year, three-day-a-week role made her glad that she had left the NHS. “It seems that as long as you have enough chutzpah the top levels of the NHS remain an option for the disgraced,” she said. “I truly hope that for the good of Alder Hey’s staff Dame Jo now fully understands a chair’s role in governance. She needs to understand that if ever staff raise concerns her role is to objectively listen, not bulldoze over the truth with her version of what she wishes was happening.

“I don’t think she has ever properly acknowledged her failings at CQC which included presiding over a bullying culture. Given this track record, it’s concerning that she is considered a suitable person to chair an NHS trust.”

James Titcombe, whose son Joshua died at Morecambe Bay, said: “I’m deeply shocked by this appointment. Jo Williams was at the helm of CQC during a time when the organisation was embroiled in a major scandal and found to have a culture that prioritised its own reputation above patients and families. The chair of a hospital trust is a hugely important role and patients and families served by Alder Hey will rightly be alarmed that someone with such a dubious track record has been appointed to this role.”

A spokesman for Alder Hey said that Dame Jo had been appointed through a “robust process”, adding: “Any issues relating to the CQC were fully explored and understood by the selection panels. We are delighted that someone of Dame Jo’s calibre will be leading Alder Hey.” Louise Shepherd, chief executive of Alder Hey, added: “Dame’s Jo’s experience within social and mental health means she is the perfect person.”

Dame Jo said that she was “incredibly proud”, adding: “I have always been driven by a passion for equality of opportunity, fairness and justice. I’m a strong believer in teamwork and partnership. I look forward to bringing this passion and experience to Alder Hey.”