

LETTER 20 FEB 2021 TO TOM GRIMES NHS IMPROVEMENT HEAD OF WHISTLEBLOWING

Dear Tom,

Poor whistleblowing governance at Worcestershire Acute Hospitals NHS Trust and NHS Improvement's oversight

The issue of Cathy Geddes' role as NHSI's assigned Improvement Director for Worcestershire Acute NHS Trust has arisen again, this time because of evidence of recent, poor whistleblowing governance at the trust, which has led to staff whistleblowing externally to both the press and the CQC.

You may presumably be aware of CQC findings published on the 19 February 2021 that maternity safety whistleblowers at the trust were reportedly ignored, and had concerns about speaking with the trust's Freedom to Speak Up Guardian.

What is omitted in reports is that the Freedom To Speak Up Guardian is in fact the Maternity Matron:

"Melanie Hurdman, Freedom to Speak Up Guardian at the Trust, who is also Matron for Maternity Inpatients and Intrapartum Care, said: "Freedom To Speak Up is vital in healthcare – it can be a matter of life or death"

<https://www.worcsacute.nhs.uk/news-and-media/950-fts-u-july-2020>

What is very worrying is that according to the CQC report, trust managers were aware of the concerns that staff had in speaking with the Freedom To Speak Up Guardian:

"We met with members of the senior leadership team who demonstrated an awareness of the service's performance and the challenges they faced, including staffing issues and the concerns staff had with speaking with the freedom to speak up guardian."

The trust board papers show no sign as far as I can see that this staff concern was acknowledged or acted upon.

In fact, the general tone of the recent board papers about Trust Freedom To Speak arrangements is somewhat self-congratulatory. For example, the November 2020 board minutes:

"090/20 GOVERNANCE 090/20/1 Freedom To Speak up Guardian

Sir David welcomed Mrs Hurdman to the meeting. He stated that the Freedom to Speak Up Guardian was crucial in the supporting the culture within the Trust.

Mrs Hurdman thanked members for inviting her to present her paper. She stated that the main highlight was the development of the portal

which has already started to ensure triangulation of key themes. Each week she has a section on Worcestershire weekly to raise awareness and she has started regional training. In summary, she was pleased with the progress being made.

Mr Yates congratulated Mrs Hurdman on her progress with the role. He stated that the People and Culture Committee had confidence in the work that she was undertaking. He encouraged members to explore the portal.

Mr Williams was also pleased with the momentum being generated. He was particularly pleased with the development of the portal.

Ms Day stated that the low level of anonymous reports was encouraging. This showed the culture was changing.

Mrs Morris also welcomed the report and highlighted the range of informal and formal forums available for staff.

Mr Hopkins observed that the key to raising concerns was ensuring that the line manager was the first line for raising concerns. Further work was needed to ensure that managers and leaders can support staff.

Mr Oosterom wondered whether Mrs Hurdman was linked to the junior doctors.

Mrs Hurdman stated that she was and she attended the junior doctor forums. She also delivered some training programmes.

Sir David thanked Mrs Hurdman for her report."

<https://www.worcsacute.nhs.uk/patient-information-and-leaflets/documents/2708-trust-board-papers-december-2020-part-1/file>

Could NHS Improvement kindly look into who knew what when about staff's concerns about speaking with the Freedom To Speak Up Guardian?

Did Cathy Geddes also know? What did she do about it?

Which other trust directors knew? Did they take any action to address staff's concerns and provide a meaningful, safe, alternative channel of reporting?

Or was the fact that staff were hesitant seen as convenient?

Many thanks and best wishes,

Minh

Dr Minh Alexander

Cc Dido Harding Chair of NHS Improvement/ England