

Minister tried to gag NHS whistleblower

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THE cabinet minister and former health secretary Andrew Lansley threatened to sack a whistleblower who lifted the lid on how the country's health regulator was failing patients, a Sunday Times investigation has revealed.

Kay Sheldon warned at a public inquiry in 2011 that the leadership of the Care Quality Commission (CQC) — where she was a board director — was in disarray and public safety was at risk.

She also warned more than a year ago of regulatory failures at University Hospitals of Morecambe Bay NHS Foundation Trust, where up to 16 babies died and which was last week placed at the centre of one of the biggest cover-ups in the history of the NHS.

Lansley, then health secretary, wrote to Sheldon in March last year after she raised her concerns, warning that he was considering her dismissal from

the CQC board. The threat was made despite specific laws to protect whistleblowers.

Correspondence seen by The Sunday Times reveals Sheldon replied to Lansley, reiterating her criticisms, highlighting failures at Morecambe Bay and warning that he was “shooting the messenger”.

She wrote: “It seems to me that it would be fundamentally unfair effectively to ‘sack’ the person raising serious, valid and substantiated failings whilst those responsible for the failings remain in post.”

It is the first evidence that ministers were directly warned of the regulator's catastrophic failings and threatened to sack the whistleblower.

The Sunday Times investigation has also found:

■ There is such a shortage of properly qualified inspectors at the CQC that the public will have to wait six months before hospital inspections can be considered robust and reliable

■ David Prior, the CQC chairman, has said he will visit

Morecambe Bay to apologise to families who lost loved ones because of failures in care

■ An MP has called for a review of previous CQC inspections after allegations that controversial sections of one report were deleted on the orders of a senior official.

The fresh disclosures are likely to fuel demands by victims' families for an independent inquiry into the regulator. A report found last week that a senior CQC official had ordered the destruction of a report that exposed inspection failings at Morecambe Bay.

“If it was not for Kay's courage and bravery, the full extent of [last] week's revelations would not now be known,” said James Titcombe, whose baby son, Joshua, died in 2008 under Morecambe Bay NHS trust's care. “[Lansley] needs to provide an explanation to justify his actions — or consider his position.”

Sheldon, who previously worked for the Mental Health

Continued on page 2 ►►