

Ministers' betrayal of the NHS whistleblowers

By **Sophie Borland**
Health Reporter



Unfairly dismissed: Dr Raj Mattu with his wife Sangeeta

LEADING doctors have accused the Government of betraying NHS whistleblowers despite promising they will be protected.

They say nothing has changed over the last year even though ministers have pledged to change the culture of the Health Service to make it easier for staff to raise concerns.

Only last week it emerged that an NHS trust had spent £10million trying to silence cardiologist Dr Raj Mattu who warned of patients dying on overcrowded wards.

He was suspended from Coventry's Walgrave Hospital in 2000 and later sacked but last Thursday he was vindicated when a High Court judge ruled he had been unfairly dismissed. Since then, a further two cases

'There has been very little change'

have come to light involving senior doctors who have effectively been barred from the NHS after raising concerns.

Peter O'Keefe, a surgeon at the University Hospital of Wales in Cardiff, has been suspended on full pay since 2012 after warning a patient had become brain damaged due to poor care.

And paediatric surgeon Shiban Ahmed has been suspended by Alder Hey in Liverpool since 2009 and wrongly accused of being 'suicidal' after warning that five patients had died needlessly.

Dr Peter Tomlin, of the Doctors' Support Group, said: 'We have constantly been promised better protection for whistleblowers and an end to long-term suspensions. Neither has happened.'

Last March, Health Secretary Jeremy Hunt promised to end 'the era of gagging NHS staff'.

It followed a damning inquiry into the Mid Staffordshire hospital scandal, in which doctors and nurses were bullied for raising concerns. It later emerged staff were being made to sign gagging orders after being sacked, mean-

Hounded out, brave staff who raised the alarm about patients' suffering

GARY WALKER

THE former chief executive of United Lincolnshire Trust was sacked in 2010 after raising concerns about care and made to sign a gagging order.

He says he was offered a £500,000 severance deal to keep quiet. The trust was later placed under investigation by health chiefs over its high mortality rates. But Mr Walker says he will never again be able to work in the NHS as managers don't trust him not to speak out.

EDWIN JESUDASON

A LEADING paediatric surgeon, Dr Jesudason was forced out in 2010 after warning that babies were dying needlessly at Alder Hey children's hospital.

His concerns were vindicated in a damning review of the hospital earlier this year which warned of safety problems due to inexperienced staff.

SANDRA HAYNES-KIRKBRIGHT

MRS Haynes-Kirkbright was an employee helping to compile hospital death rates when she claimed bosses at Royal Wolverhampton Hospital were fiddling figures.

She was suspended and received a letter saying she could be sacked. After the Mail drew attention to her case, Health Secretary Jeremy Hunt said he would ensure all action against her was frozen. But she says she is still under investigation.

DAVID ORE

THE NHS manager was sacked from Dudley Group hospitals after telling bosses that children and vulnerable adults were being abused. He said they were routinely restrained and shut away in cubicles for up to 12 hours with no food or drink.

Mr Ore was suspended then formally dismissed last year. He said he had been treated worse than a 'common criminal'.

£10M COST OF GAGGING AN NHS WHISTLEBLOWER

From last Friday's Mail

ing they lose any pay-off if they speak about poor care.

Mr Hunt set up a whistleblowing helpline for staff and promised they would be supported.

But there is growing consensus that the culture remains the same. Last month Dr Kim Holt, a paediatrician who raised the alarm at the clinic which failed to spot abuse in the high-profile Baby P case, told MPs there had

not been any significant change. She said: 'I don't think things have moved on in any significant way at all.'

And Helene Donnelly, who is helping the Department of Health draw up whistleblowing training for NHS staff, said: 'I think there's a shift beginning.'

'But when it filters down to the frontline staff, I think there's been very little change.'

In a victory for whistleblowers, Dr Mattu was cleared last Thursday of any wrongdoing. Coventry and Warwickshire NHS trust - which runs Walgrave Hospital - had pursued him through employment tribunals, running up a bill of £10million.

But there are fears that there are many other cases of whistleblowers being suspended. Dr

O'Keefe raised concerns about a patient who suffered a brain injury after becoming disconnected from a ventilator for more than ten minutes. He was suspended for 19 months after being accused of bullying colleagues.

Dr Ahmed spoke out about the quality of surgery at Alder Hey in 2009. He was suspended when the hospital ruled him to be 'suicidal'. The British Medical Association rejects that assessment.

A Department of Health spokesman said: 'NHS staff who have the courage and integrity to speak out in the interests of patient safety must be protected and listened to. The Secretary of State has written to all trusts to remind them of their responsibilities in this important area.'