

# Patients at risk while NHS fails whistleblowers, MPs warn

By Laura Donnelly, Health Editor

THE treatment of whistleblowers by the NHS is "a stain on its reputation" which has destroyed livelihoods and caused "inexcusable pain" to health professionals, MPs have warned.

Repeated failure to listen to staff who warned of risks to patients was jeopardising safety and deterring others from coming forward, the Commons health committee said. Its inquiry into com-

plaints and the raising of concerns concluded that every NHS whistleblower who is vindicated should be given an apology, and "practical redress", such as a new job, or financial compensation for the damage to their career.

A separate review of whistleblowing is considering more than 17,000 submissions concerning treatment meted out to those who have tried to raise the alarm about poor care. Whistleblowers include Dr Raj Mattu, a cardiologist who was sus-

pending for eight years, then sacked, after raising concerns about patient safety. The heart specialist told MPs he had been "hounded mercilessly" out of his job at Walsgrave Hospital in Coventry, before winning an unfair dismissal case.

Nurse Helene Donnelly told the Mid-Staffs inquiry that she became frightened to leave work unaccompanied after warning managers at Stafford Hospital that targets were being manipulated. MPs said the NHS needed to do far more to

ensure staff felt able to speak out. "The treatment of whistleblowers remains a stain on the reputation of the NHS and has led to unwarranted and inexcusable pain for a number of individuals," the report warns.

"The treatment of those whistleblowers has not only caused them direct harm but has also undermined the willingness of others to come forward, and this has ongoing implications for patient safety." MPs called for changes to the NHS com-

plaints system, saying there should be "one gateway" for all concerns by patients, regardless of whether they were about a hospital, GP or social care.

Dr Sarah Wollaston, the chairman of the committee, said too often those raising concerns were "plagued by delays," while lessons were not learnt because cases were handled hundreds of miles away. She said: "There can be no excuse for not implementing a complaints service which is easy to use and respon-

sive to patients and their families." One complaint about a doctor in the South West was first handled by a call centre in Leeds, and then diverted to London.

A separate ongoing review of NHS whistleblowing, led by Sir Robert Francis QC, the barrister who led the public inquiry into Mid-Staffs, is considering 17,500 online responses and more than 600 written submissions.

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