

NHS complacency

After all that has been done in the NHS to expose poor standards of care, and even criminal levels of negligence, it is hard to believe that a culture of cover-up still pervades our hospitals. Yet Sir Robert Francis QC, whose inquiry into Mid Staffs alerted the country to this scandal, has produced another report that is almost as disturbing. He found that NHS staff who raise concerns about patient care are still being bullied, ostracised or ignored and a "significant proportion" are afraid to speak out.

In response, Jeremy Hunt, the Health Secretary, announced that legislation would be rushed through Parliament to safeguard "whistleblowers" from victimisation. But this should be unnecessary – not simply because statutory protections supposedly already exist, but because NHS managers should be encouraging employees to speak up about bad practice wherever it is found.

The complacency that still predominates at the top of the NHS was exemplified by Chris Hopson, the chief executive of NHS Providers, which represents the trusts, on BBC Radio yesterday. He came armed with reams of data purporting to show that the NHS did most things well. But no one disputes this; in any case, providing a good, safe and caring service should be the normal state of affairs in our hospitals.

No amount of statistical self-justification can excuse the continued existence of an ethos of conspiracy and silence where the health and even the lives of patients are concerned. Perhaps new legal protections and "whistleblower guardians" are necessary, as Mr Hunt proposes. But without a change of culture at the top, nothing will happen. If a few trust managers who have been involved in this behaviour could be identified and removed from their posts, then the message might finally get home.

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