

NHS whistle-blowers fear moves to protect them will fall short

By Laura Donnelly and Patrick Sawyer

NHS whistle-blowers will be protected under discrimination laws, Jeremy Hunt has pledged – but staff who lost their jobs after raising concerns straight away branded the plans “ineffective”.

The Health Secretary outlined the plan in response to a report by Sir Robert Francis which yesterday laid bare “alarming” treatment of whistle-blowers by the NHS, with careers destroyed and staff left suicidal after being branded “snitches, back-stabbers and troublemakers”.

Sir Robert warned that the poor treatment of whistle-blowers was costing lives by deterring many more staff from speaking up when they witnessed poor care.

He called for an independent whistle-blowing guardian to be set up in every NHS trust, a national independent officer to oversee the system and changes in the law so those sacked after raising the alarm are able to find new jobs.

Mr Hunt accepted the 20 principles put forward by Sir Robert, pledging to fast-track legislation before the end of this parliament.

He told the Commons: “The message must go out today that we are calling time on bullying, intimidation and victimisation, which has no place in our NHS.”

The plans to change the law would stop the NHS “closing ranks” against those who spoke up, he said, highlighting horrific accounts of whistle-blowers who were “financially ruined; brought to the brink of suicide; and family lives being shattered” after speaking out.

But health professionals who lost their jobs in the NHS after raising safety con-

cerns last night said the plans did too little to stop poor treatment of whistle-blowers.

In the report, Sir Robert said too many were silenced by hospital managers who felt under political pressures to pretend problems did not exist. Thousands of NHS workers told the inquiry that they had been left “feeling unsafe” after raising a concern, with one in three whistle-blowers saying they felt in danger.

The barrister, who led two inquiries into the Mid Staffs scandal, said his 20 principles were “largely about doing

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better what should already be done” in the NHS.

Several NHS whistle-blowers said the plans did not do enough to penalise those who tried to bully those with safety concerns into silence.

Gary Walker, former chief executive of United Lincolnshire Hospitals Trust, said Sir Robert’s recommendations would prove to be “completely ineffective”.

He said: “The focus should have been on dealing with the individuals who victimise whistle-blowers, and these are usually trust board members. Sir Robert seems to be saying that no one is to blame and that’s absolutely ridiculous.” Mr Walker claimed his warnings to senior

NHS figures about patient safety were ignored for years until he was sacked by the trust in 2010, ostensibly for swearing in meetings.

Cathy James, chief executive of Public Concern at Work, a charity for whistle-blowers, welcomed the principles but said it was not clear whether they had “sufficient teeth” to make a difference.

Amanda Pollard, who resigned as a senior inspector with the Care Quality Commission (CQC) in 2013 after raising concerns about its inspection methods, said the plans did not do enough to help those considering raising the alarm.

Mrs Pollard, who says she has been unable to find work in the NHS since warning about risks to the public, said the recommendations would not force the health service to improve its record.

She said: “The legal protection he recommends seems to be aimed at people who are looking for work after being forced out of their job for whistle-blowing, rather than protecting whistle-blowers in their organisation.”

She added that several of the principles put forward by Sir Robert depended on the goodwill of NHS trusts and bodies to implement them.

Mrs Pollard complained to her managers after the watchdog disbanded expert teams so inspectors were left to inspect areas they knew little about – changes which are now being reversed after much criticism. She said: “If all of Sir Robert’s recommendations were in place now, I would still be hesitant about coming forward with my concerns.”