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Watchdog wants NHS whistleblowers to

highlight fears over payments from drugs firms

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THE medicines watchdog has urged whistleblowers to come forward with concerns about payments to health officials, after a *Daily Telegraph* inquiry.

The Prescription Medicines Code of Practice Authority (PMCPA) called on industry figures to pass on complaints

to help it "deal with these issues". Heather Simmonds, director of the PMCPA, which enforces the pharmaceutical industry's code of practice, suggested the problem involved more officials than those exposed by this newspaper.

She said the body had already dealt with several cases where individuals at "advisory board" meetings of drugs firms and NHS officials had raised con-

cerns. Her appeal came after *The Telegraph* revealed how senior health staff who help decide which drugs are used by GPs and hospitals are paid to work as consultants for pharmaceutical companies that want the NHS to "switch" to their products.

Ms Simmonds said: "We do have to have the complaints and the allegations in order to act. Occasionally we'll get

complaints from people who were at meetings and were concerned about what happened at the meetings and we deal with them under the code.

"So the more that we can all do to really encourage people to send complaints in will help deal with these issues and problems."

An undercover investigation by *The Telegraph* revealed some NHS staff

charge up to £15,000 to organise 'advisory board' meetings for drugs firms.

Many of the events take place in five-star hotels around the world, with some attendees telling this newspaper they were taken to "flashy" restaurants and paid large sums while considering whether to "switch" drugs.

Some NHS staff who take part argue it helps them to make "best use" of NHS

money by analysing medicines and providing expert advice.

However the disclosures prompted concern about potential conflicts of interest and questions over the impartiality of public sector staff who control budgets worth millions of pounds.

NHS England and ministers are considering forcing health staff to declare any financial ties to drugs firms.