

Medical misconduct claims will not be released to public

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Allegations of misconduct against nurses and midwives will no longer be made available for public scrutiny before disciplinary hearings, the industry watchdog has said.

The Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC), which was criticised over its handling of the charges against Pauline Cafferkey, the nurse who suffered ebola, will no longer publish allegations against medical staff on its website.

The move prevents members of the public and the media from learning the details of charges made against medical practitioners before a disciplinary tribunal.

Under the new system, a headline charge such as whether the case is about misconduct or a lack of competence will be published a week before the hearing along with the location of the hearing. Full charges will be read out at the start of hearing and will be circulated only upon request.

Ms Cafferkey was cleared earlier this month of professional misconduct after an investigation by the NMC. It ac-

cused the nurse of concealing her high temperature on returning to the UK from Sierra Leone in 2014. During a two-day hearing in Edinburgh, the NMC said that Ms Cafferkey had allowed an incorrect temperature to be recorded by Public Health England's screening facility at Heathrow airport. A panel later dismissed the charges.

The change in practice means that investigations into nurses and midwives will be dealt with differently to those made against doctors. In the case of the latter the General Medical Council refers cases to the Medical Practitioners Tribunal Service, which publishes summary allegations on its website before a hearing.

An NMC spokeswoman said that the change was designed to make the process fairer for everyone involved. She said: "As an organisation committed to continuous improvement, we are constantly reviewing our processes. Following feedback from our stakeholders and advice from the Information Commissioner, we have taken the decision to no longer publish detailed draft charges ahead of the

hearing. These changes will help to ensure fairness to all parties as charges at pre-hearing stage may be subject to change."

The NMC has faced criticism in the past over its failure to take adequate action in cases of serious misconduct or incompetence.

James Titcombe, whose newborn son Joshua died at University Hospitals of Morecambe Bay eight years ago after midwives failed to detect an infection, told *The Times* that the NMC was "not fit for purpose" and that the move towards making allegations private would "do nothing to restore confidence in the NMC".

"What its needs to do is be open and transparent. Keeping the reasons why it's taking on cases secret is opposite to what it should be doing," he said.

"The NMC does not fulfil the function of protecting people. The tragedy is that it drags people like Pauline Cafferkey through an agonising and completely unnecessary process while for the cases in which it does need to take action, like Morecambe Bay, it does very little."