

The shameful NHS cover-ups must cease

Health service staff need to know they can highlight safety concerns without the threat of persecution

IAN BIRRELL



Joshua Titcombe was just nine days old when he died in 2008. His grieving parents discovered midwives repeatedly missed chances to spot and treat an infection that led to the death of their precious baby. So they fought for an investigation – and eventually, thanks to their courage and determination, the scale of one of Britain's most distressing recent medical failures emerged.

The Morecambe Bay maternity scandal involved the deaths of 15 other babies and three mothers after what was officially dubbed a "lethal mix" of failures in a local system scarred by incompetence, denial and staff collusion. This only emerged, as so often, thanks to the heroic strength of

a shattered family. These parents faced years of denial from officials. And now, to rub salt into the sores, it emerges that the nursing watchdog monitored them for nearly a decade and spent £240,000 on legal advice to dodge their demands for information.

Yet again we witness a callous cover-up culture that demeans our health service. Politicians promise transparency, managers produce codes of conduct, front-line staff talk of openness. But when mistakes are made and systems fail, the reaction is so often to crush complainants, silence whistleblowers and sweep concerns under the carpet. Lawyers and media advisers are summoned, lies told and documents suddenly "lost".

NHS workers are often the victims, too. There are countless cases of dedicated hospital staff flagging up failings only to be bullied and gagged. Typical was Raj Mattu, a cardiologist awarded £1.2 million damages last year for a 12-year witch hunt waged against him after he warned of overcrowded services in a Coventry hospital. One recent survey of 300,000 NHS staff found only one in four thinks whistleblowers get treated fairly by hospitals – a deeply alarming statistic.

Even worse is the appalling treatment of bereaved families

Telegraph • 2nd February 2017

fighting to prevent more patients from dying needlessly. Look at the horrific treatment of Julie Bailey, driven from her home after she struggled to uncover the shameful Mid-Staffordshire scandal involving hundreds of premature deaths – including that of her mother. Or more recently, at Sara Ryan, an academic abused, stonewalled and spied upon after confronting dreadful systemic failures that led to the drowning of her teenage son following an epileptic seizure in an Oxford hospital.

So often these are the people who highlight problems, not those official watchdogs marshalling armies of pen-pushers to tick boxes. This is why the actions of the Nursing and Midwifery Council – the statutory regulator that turned to lawyers to redact documents and limit information in the public domain in the Titcombe case – are so depressing. One report received by the family was reduced to 10 readable words, others were filled with incomplete sentences. Yet this body has the gall to brag about "transparent processes" when nurses and midwives "fall short of our standards".

Human beings make mistakes, so there will be always failures in a health system – especially when hard-pressed staff are under intense pressure in



FOLLOW Ian Birrell on Twitter @ianbirrell;
READ MORE at telegraph.co.uk/opinion

overloaded hospitals. But such sorry attitudes are the flip side of a service that relies heavily on public adoration, always complaining of cuts while often failing to fix justified concerns. I have seen with my own family how managers and medics obfuscate after bad mistakes, while hearing countless sad cases from others over the years.

Politicians should stop repeating platitudes about the "wonderful" NHS, which lags European standards in many critical areas from infant mortality to stroke death rates, and finally treat this sickness at the heart of our troubled system. As in the airline industry, staff should know they can raise even minor safety concerns without risking their career. And patients – especially those lethally let down – must know mistakes will be examined in the most open manner and lessons learnt to stop others from suffering similar pain.

Suspicion of whistleblowers exists in other public services. Only yesterday a tribunal found police in Cleveland broke the law by spying on a whistleblower and journalists. But this culture can be fatal in the NHS, corroding services while utterly contemptuous of patients and good staff. We must cut out this cancer of cover-up before it spreads further.