

**The health service in England should learn from Norway, where reporting of poor practice is encouraged and employees feel safe to speak out, writes Nicola Davies**

## WHISTLEBLOWERS UNITED

The NHS is known for its inconsistency in supporting nurses who report care failings and for the repercussions of making those reports – bullying, career limitation and even job loss.

The question remains: what can be done to ensure that staff feel able to report faults in health care without fearing for their safety?

An RCN survey of 8,000 nurses in 2013 found that 25 per cent had been warned against revealing risks to patient safety, and 44 per cent feared the reprisals that can follow reporting of poor practice. Those who had raised concerns often found that no action was taken.

The Department of Health's attempts to make zero harm a reality for whistleblowers can only happen if adequate support systems are in place.

Global approaches to whistleblowing may provide some answers. The RCN has highlighted a case study from Norway where almost 80 per cent of employees in the

country's public sector blow the whistle on poor practice. National policies encourage the disclosure of harmful practices, and healthcare workers in most hospitals use an electronic complaints system. Serious reports are escalated to the hospital board.

### Investigating concerns

High priority cases are flagged with the Norwegian Knowledge Centre for the Health Services

(NOKC), a national body

responsible for upholding quality standards and ensuring patient safety.

Anonymised concerns can also be reported directly to NOKC for investigation.

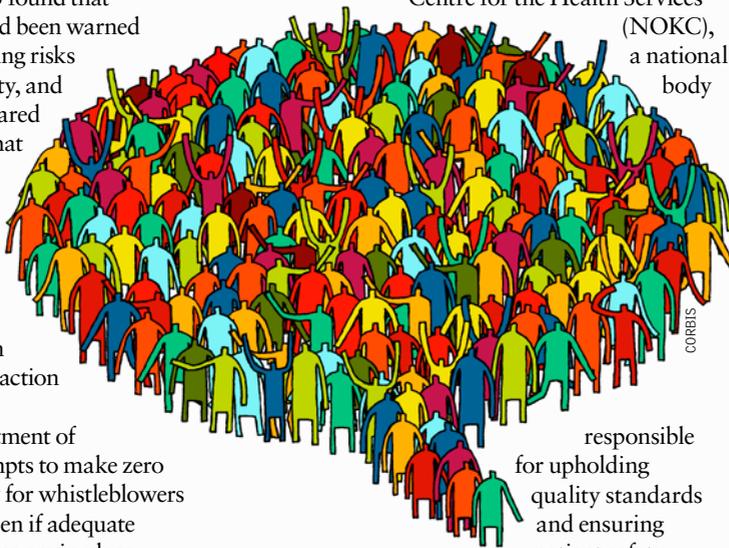
If an employee feels he or she has been victimised for reporting poor care, the employer must prove that there was no retaliation or pay compensation. This is in stark contrast to England, where the burden is on the employee to prove that there was retaliation.

To ensure UK nurses receive the support they need when reporting

services that put patients at risk, drastic changes are required in management policies, such as:

- ▶ Nursing organisations and unions should provide nurses with a safe place to voice their concerns about poor care.
- ▶ Support should be available to help nurses who lose their job as a result of raising concerns about patient care.
- ▶ RCN members can already phone a whistleblowing hotline to raise concerns or seek protection from victimisation, although this does not allow anonymity. A similar system via a website, made available to all healthcare workers, could enable anonymous reporting.
- ▶ An independent complaints system for all healthcare professionals would ensure that complaints cannot be ignored and blame cannot be shifted as a report moves through the management hierarchy.
- ▶ A system of reward rather than punishment should be set up for nurses who uncover poor care. If bullying and victimisation occur, staff need reassurance that their persecutors will be punished.
- ▶ Anonymous reports should be taken seriously and investigated thoroughly. If nurses cannot trust the system, then that same system cannot expect nurses to feel able to report patient care issues **NS**

Nicola Davies is a health psychologist and writer



### RESOURCES

Norwegian case study of nurse whistleblowing  
[tinyurl.com/om8rwud](http://tinyurl.com/om8rwud)  
RCN whistleblowing hotline  
[tinyurl.com/WB-helpline](http://tinyurl.com/WB-helpline)