

## Making space for healthcare whistleblowers making waves

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Healthcare professionals are required by professional codes of conduct to speak up when things are not right but there is compelling evidence, for example from the 2015 *Freedom To Speak Up* review, that it is not always safe to do so. Many doctors, nurses and other healthcare staff have lost their careers, and worse, after raising valid concerns, almost invariably internally in the first instance. Such mistreatment of staff who have spoken up cannot be in the best interests of patients, staff affected, healthcare providers or their funders. It generally results from employers giving unwarranted priority to organisational reputation, whilst seeking to discredit whistleblowers and cover up concerns they have raised.

The *Freedom To Speak Up* review recommendations focus on the need for culture change, improvements in the handling of cases and measures to support speaking up, with acknowledgement of the weakness of legislation in this area. These are long term aims, and many NHS whistleblowers who have suffered retaliation from misguided employers were disappointed by the review. Some have embarked on public campaigns to draw attention to the phenomenon of reprisals against staff who have raised concerns, typically about matters such as patient safety, inadequate staffing levels, fraud and incompetence. Such campaigns have included publications in newspapers, magazines and the medical literature, TV and radio appearances, conference presentations, books, blogs and postings on social media.

This talk will present what appears to be a pattern of reprisals against healthcare staff who speak up, illustrated with contemporary examples in the public domain. It will outline the *Freedom To Speak Up* review's themes, principles and recommendations, and describe ways in which whistleblowers have sought space to make their voices heard. It will include a personal view on what needs to be done to make it safe for staff to speak up.

**Key words:** Speaking up; Retaliation; Culture change; Patient safety

**Biography:** Hugh is a clinical scientist. He was unfairly dismissed by hospital managers after seeking to improve practice in his area of responsibility. He is contributing to a number of national initiatives aimed at making it safe for NHS staff to raise concerns in the public interest without risk of reprisals.