

Hospital trust 'tried to gag whistleblowers'

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A hospital trust considered the worst in Britain by the NHS regulator regularly discouraged staff from expressing fears about the safety of patients, an independent inquiry is expected to conclude.

Senior managers at Mid Staffordshire NHS foundation trust, where poor working conditions may have contributed to more than 1,000 deaths, will be accused of promoting a culture of secrecy, according to sources close to the inquiry.

The disclosure of a key finding of the report, expected to be released this week, comes as campaigners for patients who suffered neglect in Stafford and Cannock Chase hospitals call for a judicial review into the trust.

"Staff have known about the problems on the wards for many years, but there has been no means by which they can bring them up. Those who have tried to do so have been shot down. Some have been ordered to withdraw or hide their allegations," an unnamed official said.

The inquiry was launched in September by the health secretary following a Healthcare Commission investigation that delivered the most savage indictment of any NHS organisation in the commission's five-year history. Its report condemned "appalling" standards of care at the trust's hospitals in Stafford and Cannock, particularly involving emergency admissions, which may have contributed to up to 1,000 deaths between 2005 and 2008.

One senior Stafford hospital official was suspended last week after documents from the inquiry allegedly showed that she tried to cover up damning comments about the care given to a 20-year-old who died just hours after being sent home from the accident and emergency department.

Kate Levy, board secretary and head of legal services at Mid Staffordshire NHS Foundation Trust, is being investigated over allegations that she encouraged a doctor to rewrite a report into the death of John Moore-Robinson.

Staff in accident and emergency failed to spot that the telecommunications worker had a ruptured spleen following a mountain bike accident on Cannock Chase in April 2006. He died at his home in Coalville, Leicestershire, less than 24 hours after being sent home with painkillers.

A report by Ivan Phair, an A&E consultant, into his treatment said: "The premature death of Mr Moore-Robinson in my opinion was an avoidable situation. I feel that an independent expert would criticise the management afforded to him by the staff. There is a high probability that the level of care delivered to Mr Moore-Robinson was negligent."

After reading the report, Levy wrote to Phair asking him to erase the comments. Her letter stated: "As reports are generally read out in full at the inquest, and press and family will be present, with a view to avoiding further distress to the family and adverse publicity I would wish to avoid stressing possible failures on the part of the trust."

The report was not presented to the inquest. Mr Moore-Robinson's parents only found out about Levy's letters when copies were given to them by a lawyer at the inquiry.

Staff have claimed that they have been intimidated into silence when they have raised concerns. Pradip Singh, a senior consultant who gave evidence to the inquiry, used the protection of the Commons all-party health committee last year to explain what went wrong at Stafford hospital after what he called a "savage reduction" in levels of nursing.

"Over the years, many clinicians had noticed deterioration in the standards of patient care, which became particularly acute approximately three years ago when major cutbacks were made in staffing numbers. This included a savage reduction in the number of nursing staff," he wrote.

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Singh, a gastroenterologist, said that he and other consultants had complained to senior medical managers and the trust's management, but those who complained had been ignored and branded as troublemakers. He said that a "palpable culture of intimidation" in the trust deterred others from speaking out publicly.

The culture of secrecy at the trust has been reinforced by a written "whistleblowers" policy that discouraged an open discussion of problems, according to one charity that made a submission to the inquiry.

Julie Bailey, founder of the patient group Cure the NHS, said that more than 100 families who support her organisation are now pinning their hopes on a judicial review.

Carole Watts, who leads the clinical negligence team at Pictons, says that "This independent inquiry is likely to highlight serious issues regarding openness, staffing levels and patient care at Mid Staffordshire NHS Foundation Trust. Patient safety should be treated as paramount by those at senior level. This requires adequate staffing levels and a policy of openness which enables staff to raise their concerns about patient care without fear of reprisal. Staff should be encouraged to bring their concerns out in the open so that these can be fully investigated and the appropriate steps taken to improve standards. It is important that when errors occur these are not covered up so that lessons can be learned and patient safety improved."

If you have been affected by a similar incident, please contact the Pictons Clinical Negligence Team on 0845 263 7509 or email carole.watts@pictons.co.uk.