

# Understanding the knowledge gaps in whistleblowing and speaking up in health care: narrative reviews of the research literature and formal inquiries, a legal analysis and stakeholder interviews

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## Plain English summary

Knowledge gaps in whistleblowing and speaking up in health care

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## Plain English summary

When health-care professionals see poor or unsafe care, it is important that they speak up so that care can be improved. Sometimes, speaking up is informal and managed within the care organisation. At other times, speaking out happens by alerting outside authorities (whistleblowing). There is some evidence to suggest that, in many parts of the NHS, staff may feel unable to speak up, and that even when they do speak up, their organisation may respond inappropriately. As well as poor care going unaddressed, in some instances staff have been bullied or victimised for raising legitimate concerns. This research seeks to better understand the processes associated with effective whistleblowing policies in health-care contexts. It is based on a review of the academic literature on whistleblowing and related matters; an analysis of formal Inquiry reports into poor standards of care in the NHS; a review of the legal framework(s) that seeks to protect whistleblowers; and interviews with key stakeholders. In doing so, we explore the factors that support (or inhibit) whistleblowing, and examine why some managers do not respond (or respond inappropriately) when concerns about care are brought to their attention. We conclude that current policy initiatives that seek to develop better whistleblowing policies in the NHS are in need of a stronger theoretical and empirical evidence base. We set out a wide range of issues that need consideration in developing whistleblowing policies, including the need for better legislation to support and protect people when they raise concerns about poor-quality care. We also highlight a number of areas that require more research, in particular the reasons why some NHS managers do not respond when genuine concerns are raised.

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