Implementation of 'Freedom to Speak Up Guardians' in NHS acute and mental health trusts in England: the FTSUG mixed-methods study

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Disclaimer: This report contains transcripts of interviews conducted in the course of the research and contains language that may offend some readers.

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Plain English summary

FTSUG mixed-methods study

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Plain English summary

Workers who 'speak up' or 'raise concerns' about problems with health-care services make an important contribution to patient safety in the NHS, but they are often ignored and/or mistreated by colleagues. The aim of this study was to better understand a new role called a 'Freedom to Speak Up Guardian' (also known as a 'Guardian'), which was recently introduced in NHS England to support workers to speak up. We wanted to find out how Guardians were being introduced in acute trusts and mental health trusts, their experiences of working as Guardians and whether or not and how they helped workers to 'speak up' about their concerns. We used three different approaches to find out more.

First, we reviewed other studies that had tried to understand and improve speaking up in health care. An important finding was that researchers need to further consider workplace culture and broader societal culture when trying to improve speaking up, as these are important in understanding why some attempts to improve speaking up work and other attempts do not.

We then interviewed 87 Guardians and found that there were many different approaches taken by NHS trusts when introducing the Guardian role. Some Guardians worked full time and had access to resources, whereas others were allocated little time, no resources and worked as a Guardian alongside another role. Following this, we spent 3 months in six trusts observing and interviewing 106 Guardians and others who worked closely with Guardians. Overall, we concluded that the ideal introduction of the Guardian role had the following ingredients: (1) key people in the trust shared the view that the Guardian role was important for a positive workplace culture; (2) a trust introduced policies that supported these views; (3) a trust frequently evaluated the introduction of the role; and (4) there had to be sufficient time and resources to best support speaking up by workers and the well-being of the Guardian.

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