HEALTH AND SPORT COMMITTEE

CONSULTATION ON THE PROPOSALS FOR NEW INDEPENDENT NATIONAL WHISTLEBLOWING OFFICER ROLE

SUBMISSION FROM Rhona Atkinson, NHS Grampian

How will the order affect the whistleblowing process?

There is firstly a need for clarity on what is meant by the use of the term whistleblowing.

In general discussion it could be taken that the term whistleblowing refers to any and all complaints or concerns raised in respect of undertaking employment duties. Were that to be the accepted interpretation of the then there is clear disregard of existing professional standards and internal complaints procedures for the handling and learning from the day to day issues that arise.

That is not to argue that all such processes are properly fulfilling their intended purpose but there needs to be acknowledgement of their existence and the part they play in the overall situation.

So, for me, this order does give a level of parity with other national complaints procedures and therefore does act to recognise the significance and impact of issues that properly fall under the correct interpretation of whistleblowing.

What needs greater emphasis and drive to ensure that it is in place and being used properly is the internal complaints procedure. In essence without this element of the overall system the proposed whistleblowing process could not be enacted or worse the independent appointee will be engaged in refusing to investigate and that would denigrate the intended purpose of this proposed role.

In discussing this proposal within NHSG the question was raised of why something similar to a Duty of Candour for implementation across the staffing body if seeking to change the culture towards handling areas of concern of poor behaviour, linking where required to existing disciplinary procedures.

The other aspect of whistleblowing that I debate this proposal will impact on positively is the stigma that is associated with being a whistleblower. It is a hugely significant decision to be a whistleblower and therefore there is an argument to ensue means of handling within the work environment issues that could escalate to whistleblowing but in a way that is respectful and supportive of all involved parties.

Should the Ombudsman fulfil the role of Independent National Whistleblower?

Yes, provided there is a correct use of the term whistleblowing and that there are internal processes completed before an issue is deemed appropriate for referring to the INW.
Does the order give the Independent Whistleblowing Officer adequate powers?

Yes

Is there anything that you would add, amend or remove from the order?

In reading through the documentation supplied on and around the order I do not agree with the stated intent that by the introduction of an INW Officer there will be an impact on the efficiency and effectiveness of the health service. I even debate that this role and its intended remit will impact on the culture of these organisations.

There is no doubt for me that in better handling the day to day issues that arise, by means of sound professional and organisational processes, that there will be an impact on culture, efficiency and effectiveness. But I do not see how the role being proposed and its remit will do that, unless as part of the introduction of the role there is a focus on the internal processes of all Health Boards that would be the preliminary stages that have to be completed before an issue can be considered appropriate for the INW Officer to investigate.

Be clear I am not arguing that all is fine out here and all we have to do is add the new role on. Far from that. There is significant work to be done, specifically to reflect the inevitable outcomes that arise from the very stressed and pressured workforces all Health Boards have, to ensure that each Health Board for all its staff operates, through its staff, a means by which issues and concerns can be professionally and properly handled and for learning to flow from that.

To summarise, the issues I have with this proposal are not the role and remit per se but the expectations placed upon it as well as the lack of focus on the internal processes that, should they fail, require the invoking of the national role.

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