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## Public Concern at Work / Nursing Standard Whistleblowing Survey 2008

### Introduction and Analysis

752 nurses responded voluntarily to a Public Concern at Work / Nursing Standard survey on their experience of whistleblowing. The majority of the nurses who responded (58%) work in a hospital and nearly two-thirds (64%) have worked for more than 6 years.

The survey shows that good whistleblowing arrangements save lives. In healthcare organisations that promote whistleblowing the difference is startling. Fewer patients are harmed, the vast majority of concerns are handled well and twice as many nurses report no reprisals for speaking up.

The positive results from those organisations that give an effective lead on whistleblowing is great news for patients, the public and taxpayers. However, most nurses say their organisations do not do enough to encourage speaking up. This is indefensible when the costs are so negligible and the benefits so great. There is no point in implementing whistleblowing arrangements if staff don't know about them or trust them. Where good arrangements are well promoted, patients benefit. It means the difference between good nurses doing as best they can and excellent organisations delivering high quality health care.

Overall, the survey demonstrates that the culture for raising patient safety concerns is improving and that most nurses will speak up even at some personal risk to themselves. While it is not surprising that the number one reason cited for nurses not raising a patient safety concern is that nothing will be done, it is notable that the other top deterrents are fear of hostility from, and loyalty to colleagues rather than fear of discipline by management.

- Two-thirds (68%) of nurses said they had a concern about a serious risk to patient safety in the last three years and almost all (87%) raised it.
- 77% of nurses say that the culture for raising concerns in their workplace is the same or better than it was three years ago.
- Where organisations promote whistleblowing well, fewer nurses reported having had a serious patient safety in the last three years (59%), more raised their concern (98%) and the majority said it was handled well or fairly (79%) than in organisations who do not do enough to promote whistleblowing (79%, 84%, and 37% respectively).

## The experience of nurses who blew the whistle

### improving local accountability

- Most nurses want to make whistleblowing work locally with 96% saying they raised their serious concern internally. Only 4% of nurses raised their concern outside their workplace (e.g. Department of Health, regulator, patient or patient's family) and none raised their concern with the media.

### helping avoid harm to patients

- Half (49%) of the nurses who said they raised a concern about a serious risk to patient safety said it was handled fairly or well. Of these, 15% nonetheless said that the risk they identified went on to cause harm to patients.

### 1 in 3 victimised

- 38% of nurses said they suffered serious or lasting damage to their career for raising their concern. Of those, 36% said the serious risk they identified went on to cause harm to patients.

## Key influences on nurses

### promoting whistleblowing

- Where nurses believe their organisations do enough to promote whistleblowing, 67% said their serious concern was handled well (i.e. the patient safety issue was properly addressed or resolved) and 81% said they did not suffer reprisals.
- Where organisations do little to promote whistleblowing, only 16% said their serious concern was handled well, 52% said they did not suffer reprisals.
- 80% of nurses who said their organisation promotes whistleblowing well described their organisation as having an open or very open relationship to the public. Where organisations do not promote whistleblowing, only 34% of nurses answered similarly.

### culture / obstacles to speaking up

- The main reason nurses cite for not blowing the whistle on patient safety is that it will make no difference. The second two reasons are loyalty to colleagues and fear of disapproval by colleagues.

### misuse

- 17% of nurses said their organisations had used their whistleblowing arrangements to discourage staff from raising a concern.

- 20% said a colleague had used whistleblowing to protect their own position or pursue a private agenda.

### Key differences

#### length of service

- Nurses with six years or more experience are more likely to blow the whistle (90%) than nurses with less than six years experience (80%).

#### hospital versus primary care

- More NHS nurses in primary care (45%) reported suffering reprisals for raising their concern than those working in hospitals (29%). However primary care nurses said they would be just as likely as their hospital colleagues to raise a serious concern about patient safety next week if they had one (85%).

#### it's better with the NHS

- Fewer nurses working outside the NHS (30%) reported their serious concern being handled fairly or well than those within the NHS (51%), more said patient harm was caused (30%) than their NHS colleagues (20%) and twice as many (65%) reported suffering reprisals for speaking up (34% in the NHS).
- Though nurses in and out of the NHS say the belief that nothing will be done is the strongest deterrent to colleagues speaking up, nurses outside the NHS identify fear of dismissal or discipline as having a stronger deterrent effect than a worry about the reaction of other colleagues.

9 May 2008

Public Concern at Work