

Nina Lakhani

Doctors and nurses who fail to blow the whistle on substandard care or patient abuse should face being struck off the register, according to the influential Health Select Committee.

A "dramatic rise" in complaints against individual health professionals over the last year is revealed in the first annual reports about the General Medical and the Nursing and Midwifery Councils. This follows a cascade of scandals involving vulnerable and elderly people in care homes and NHS hospitals.

Stephen Dorrell, chairman of the Committee, said there had been little focus on quality over the last 12 months amid polarised debates about savings and NHS reforms. Mr Dorrell said the Committee wanted the regulators to show "real leadership" and change the culture to ensure whistleblowing was regarded as a professional obligation and not a choice. The Committee today confirms that it will examine the perverse ways in which some whistleblowers face employment sanctions after The Independent revealed several cases where health professionals were suspended or sacked for raising concerns.

Mr Dorrell said: "For those doctors and nurse who knew, or ought to have known about what was going on at Mid Staffs or Winterbourne House, averting their eyes is no defence and they should be in front of the regulator. This doesn't require a change of policy but a change in culture, so that second best is no longer tolerated because it is incompatible with professional obligations."

Both regulators said they would act upon the recommendations.

The Committee also said the Government must urgently tackle the serious problem posed by doctors and nurses trained in Europe, and who are legally entitled to work in the UK without having their language or clinical skills tested.

Both regulators must investigate the increase in complaints before next year's Committee inquiry and deal with cases involving safety issues more quickly.

Niall Dickson, GMC Chief Executive, said: "We are committed to meeting the challenge set by the Committee to continue to provide leadership to the profession, particularly in relation to the standards of performance and conduct we expect, so that patients across the UK get the high-quality care they need."

Professor Dickon Weir-Hughes, Chief Executive of the NMC, said: "In the next few weeks we will develop an action plan that will set out our plans to address the areas of concern highlighted by the Committee. We will also seek to update the Committee at regular intervals throughout the coming year."

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"We welcome this report, which will help us drive forward our already ambitious agenda of reform. The Committee describes the GMC as a 'high performing regulator' that is seen nationally and internationally as robust and well-functioning. According to the MPs our financial performance is good and we are making progress across a range of issues, including many of those identified in the Committee's earlier report on the revalidation of doctors.

"However, the Committee rightly challenges us as well as all health professionals and their regulators to speak up if they are aware of poor patient care. We know there is more we can do in this area and we are committed to doing it. Later this year we will be consulting on a new version of our core guidance, Good Medical Practice, and producing new advice about raising concerns. But this is not just about releasing guidance - the important point is that doctors are aware of these issues and act appropriately. We will be working with the profession to take this forward.

"We are also encouraged by the Committee's support for our plans to modernise our fitness to practise work and the

management of hearings, including crucially allowing us the right of appeal against decisions we feel do not protect the public. These plans include establishing a separate body to manage fitness to practise hearings, the Medical Practitioners Tribunal Service (MPTS). The MPTS will be led by a senior judicial figure who will have responsibility for the performance management of panellists, an important area the Committee highlighted in its report today. We will move as quickly as possible to appoint the first chair of the MPTS, following the GMC Council's decision last week to seek to work with the Department of Health to take forward these plans.

"And, working with others, we are committed to meeting the challenge set by the Committee to continue to provide leadership to the profession, particularly in relation to the standards of performance and conduct we expect, so that patients across the UK get the high-quality care they need."