Regulator calls on NHS workers to join 5,000 plus that have blown whistle

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More than 5,500 health and social care staff contacted the Care Quality Commission over a seven-month period this year to whistleblow about poor care concerns, the regulator has revealed as it urged more workers to speak up.

In a report about its initial findings on the state of complaints handling within healthcare organisations, the CQC said that between 1 April and 31 October 2014, 5,638 staff contacted the CQC.

It follows a 10% increase in whistleblowers contacting the CQC in previous years, from 8,643 in 2012-13 to 9,473 in 2013-14.
The regulator said it uses the information provided to inform its regulatory activities and to monitor which organisations may need to improve their procedures to make it easier for staff to raise concerns. It called for more people to come forward.

“CQC wants staff to tell us if they know about poor care”

CQC

However, the report – called Complainants Matter – acknowledged that the CQC was not directly responsible for resolving individual cases, which should instead be dealt with by individual provider organisations, such as trusts, or the health service ombudsman.

“[The] CQC wants staff to tell us if they know about poor care,” said the regulator, adding: “We know we need to do more to explain what action we take when people bring us information, and to provide clarity over what we can and cannot do.”

Meanwhile, the total number of written patient complaints received by all NHS hospital and community health services has increased every year since 2011-12, said the report.

Mental health services saw a 17% increase in complaints, from 10,439 in 2011-12 to 12,221 in 2013-14.

Written complaints about acute services also increased – by around 4% – from 72,794 in 2011-12 to 75,424 in 2013-14. Community health services complaints went up by 7% over the same period, from 7,735 to 8,293.

The data in the report shows that in 2013-14 the most common reason for complaint by a long way was a problem with clinical treatment. This was followed by attitude of staff, delay or cancellation of appointments, and communication from the service to the patient.

“It’s time for all of us to make the shift to a listening and learning culture”

Mike Richards

The CQC found a key area of concern across acute, mental health and community services were the length of complaints investigations and people feeling their concerns were not taken seriously.

However, the regulator pointed to results from the NHS staff survey in 2013, which found around 70% of staff across all three services agreed that their organisation acts on concerns raised by patients.

“There is a discrepancy between the views of staff and the experience of people who have made complaints [which] needs further investigation,” said the CQC.

Mike Richards, CQC chief inspector of hospitals, said: “This report provides a snapshot in which some things are already fairly clear. There is wide variation in the way complaints are handled and much more could be done to encourage an open culture where complaints are welcomed and learned from.
'While most providers have complaints processes in place, people’s experiences of the systems are not consistently good," he said.

He added: "It’s time for all of us – regulators, providers, professionals and commissioners – to make the shift to a listening and learning culture that encourages and embraces complaints and concerns as opportunities to improve the quality of care."

In October, the CQC introduced mandatory tougher inspection requirements around how well complaints and concerns are handled.

This followed a review by Ann Clwyd MP and Professor Patricia Hart, published last year, which called for a revolution in the way in which the NHS handles complaints.