Exclusive: Pioneer nurse warns that 'whistleblowing guardians' must be screened

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Nurse whistleblower Helene Donnelly has called for “rapid” action to ensure the introduction of the new “guardian” role recommended by Sir Robert Francis is not “used and abused”.

Ms Donnelly said she wanted to see a checklist of qualities and standards drawn up swiftly for the new "freedom to speak up guardians" to avoid the “wrong people” being selected for the job.

The role was a key recommendation of Sir Robert’s independent review of whistleblowing – Freedom to Speak Up – which looked at the treatment of staff who speak out and what measures should be introduced to create a more open reporting culture within the NHS.

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Sir Robert’s report, published last week, said that a “freedom to speak up guardian” should be appointed in every NHS trust to provide independent support and advice to staff about raising concerns. This full-time employee should be able to intervene if the complainant suffers any harm and must be able to escalate concerns outside of the organisation to bodies, said the report.

In accepting all of Sir Robert’s recommendations “in principle”, health secretary Jeremy Hunt said he supported the idea of the guardian. He stated “there is no reason” for trusts not to get on with implementing the recommendations “right away, particularly in making sure staff have an independent person they can raise concerns with”.

Ms Donnelly, whose current job as Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent Partnership Trust’s ambassador for cultural change inspired the new role, said the position should become standardised across the country so that the Care Quality Commission can identify any wrongdoing.

“I am acutely aware that people will potentially use and abuse this role – that it will be used as a tick box or the worst people will be put in the position to do it – and so we need to make sure that it is monitored,” she told Nursing Times.

“The CQC has told me it would be happy to inspect the role to make sure it is not the bullies or people who are ignoring or not challenging issues [who are in post],” Ms Donnelly added.

She acknowledged that “a lot of staff” may not feel confident in the independence of the guardian, who would be expected to raise issues with chief executives and if necessary escalate issues externally to regulators.

However, she said, this should not be a cause for concern provided training is given to the guardian, they are scrutinised and are made to justify their decisions to the CQQ if they fail to act.