

POLICY DOCUMENT

Whistleblowing – Guidelines for Doctors and Dentists in training

2008 (Version 1.0)
HR>TSRG>QMG>SMT

Policy Review Schedule

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Contents

| | |
|---|----|
| Policy Review Schedule..... | 3 |
| Role of the Northern Ireland Medical and Dental Training Agency..... | 5 |
| Policy Impact or Influence | 7 |
| Legislative Influence..... | 7 |
| 1. Introduction | 8 |
| 2. What is whistleblowing? | 8 |
| 3. What is the difference between making a complaint and blowing the whistle? | 9 |
| 4. Public Interest | 10 |
| 5. Employer Responsibilities | 11 |
| 6. Trainee Responsibilities | 12 |
| 7. Confidentiality and Anonymity | 12 |
| 8. How to Raise a Concern | 13 |
| 9. The Investigation..... | 14 |
| 10. Independent Advice | 14 |
| 11. Support for trainees accused of inappropriate behaviour or malpractice | 15 |

Role of the Northern Ireland Medical and Dental Training Agency

The Northern Ireland Medical and Dental Training Agency (NIMDTA) is an Arm's Length Body sponsored by the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS) to train postgraduate medical and dental professionals for Northern Ireland. NIMDTA seeks to serve the government, public and patients of Northern Ireland by providing specialist advice, listening to local needs and having the agility to respond to regional requirements.

NIMDTA commissions, promotes and oversees postgraduate medical and dental education and training throughout Northern Ireland. Its role is to attract and appoint individuals of the highest calibre to recognised training posts and programmes to ensure the provision of a highly competent medical and dental workforce with the essential skills to meet the changing needs of the population and health and social care in Northern Ireland.

NIMDTA organises and delivers the recruitment, selection and allocation of doctors and dentists to foundation, core and specialty training programmes and rigorously assesses their performance through annual review and appraisal. NIMDTA manages the quality of postgraduate medical and dental education in HSC Trusts and in general medical and dental practices through learning and development agreements, the receipt of reports, regular meetings, trainee surveys and inspection visits. It works in close partnership with local education providers to ensure that the training and supervision of trainees support the delivery of high quality safe patient care.

NIMDTA recognises and trains clinical and educational supervisors and selects, appoints, trains and develops educational leaders for

foundation, core and specialty medical and dental training programmes throughout NI.

NIMDTA is accountable to the General Medical Council (GMC) for ensuring that the standards set by the GMC for medical training, educational structures and processes are achieved. The Postgraduate Medical Dean, as the 'Responsible Officer' for doctors in training, has a statutory role in making recommendations to the GMC to support the revalidation of trainees. Revalidation is the process by which the GMC confirms that doctors are up to date and fit to practice. NIMDTA also works to the standards in the COPDEND framework for the quality development of postgraduate Dental training in the UK.

NIMDTA enhances the standard and safety of patient care through the organisation and delivery of relevant and valued career development for general medical and dental practitioners and dental care professionals. It also supports the career development of general medical practitioners and the requirements for revalidation through the management and delivery of GP appraisal.

NIMDTA aims to use the resources provided to it efficiently, effectively and innovatively. NIMDTA's approach to training is that trainees, trainers and educators should put patients first, should strive for excellence and should be strongly supported in their roles.

Policy Impact or Influence

Changes to this policy may have an impact or an influence on the following:

- Managing of Trainees Requiring Support
- Whistleblowing – H&SCT policy

Legislative Influence

This policy has been influenced by:

- GMC – Guidance on Good Medical Practice
- Public Interest Disclosure (NI) Order (PIDO) 1998 (revised 2004)
- DFP Guidance on Public Interest Disclosure (Whistleblowing) 2003
- DFP Guidance DAO (DFP) 11/08
- Letter from Minister for Health, Social Services and Public Safety (E Poots MLA) 22/03/12

1. Introduction

The NI Medical and Dental Training Agency seeks to foster a climate of openness and a culture where it is safe and acceptable to raise concerns about inappropriate behaviour. To achieve this aim, the Agency wishes to encourage doctors and dentists in training within the Northern Ireland Deanery to report genuine concerns without fear of reprisal or victimisation. Employers must support employees who raise concerns and take all reasonable steps to ensure they are not victimised.

These guidelines set out the process by which trainees can voice their concerns without fear of recrimination and are intended to provide an effective system of support.

2. What is whistleblowing?

Someone “blows the whistle” when they tell their employer, a regulator, a customer, the police or the media about a dangerous or illegal activity that they are aware of through their work.

Whistleblowing can inform those who need to know about health and safety risk, potential environmental problems, fraud, corruption, deficiencies in the care of vulnerable people, cover-ups and many other

problems. Often it is only through whistleblowing that this information comes to light and can be addressed before real damage is done.

3. What is the difference between making a complaint and blowing the whistle?

When someone blows the whistle they are raising a concern about danger or illegality that affects others. The person blowing the whistle is usually not directly, personally affected by the danger or illegality and consequently the whistleblower rarely has a personal interest in the outcome of any investigation into their concern. For this reason the whistleblower is not expected to prove the malpractice.

This is different from a complaint where the individual making the complaint is personally affected. This could involve, for example, a breach of individual employment rights or bullying and harassment. The person making the case has a vested interest in the outcome and is expected to be able to prove their case.

For these reasons it is not in anyone's interest if an organisation's whistleblowing policy is used to pursue a personal grievance.

4. Public Interest

The Public Interest Disclosure (Northern Ireland) Order 1998 provides employees with protection against victimisation should they reasonably and in good faith report such concerns. The act is designed to promote responsible whistleblowing while at the same time protecting individuals who make disclosures or misconduct or malpractice. It is not designed to protect individuals who have a personal grievance against their employer.

Trainees should ensure that they are familiar with their Trust policy regarding whistleblowing. Employers have an obligation to support employees who raise concerns and should take all reasonable steps to ensure that they are not victimised. The victimisation of staff is regarded as a serious offence and will be dealt with under the Trust's disciplinary procedures.

Concerns around issues that are in the public interest should be raised with an appropriate officer of the Trust so that they can be dealt with effectively and in a spirit of openness. The Trust's Whistleblowing Policy should be followed if a trainee reasonably believes that any of the following either has occurred, is in the process of occurring, or is likely to occur:

- misconduct or poor practice which could place service users at risk of harm

- knowledge of any employee's behaviour which may pose a risk to children or vulnerable adults, or any service user
- financial malpractice including fraud or suspected fraud
- belief that a criminal offence has been committed or is likely to be committed
- dangers to health and safety including disregard for legislation
- failure to comply with any legal duty (including breach of contract, negligence or breach of administrative law)
- damage to or the risk of damage to the environment
- the concealing of information regarding any of the above

5. Employer Responsibilities

All those with managerial or supervisory responsibilities should recognise that raising a concern under whistleblowing can be difficult for their employees. They should:

- take any concerns reported to them seriously, and consider them fully, fairly and sympathetically
- take appropriate action promptly, as laid down in the Trust's Whistleblowing policy
- seek advice from appropriate departments where necessary
- ensure employees raising a concern are kept fully informed of progress through the procedure, and are not victimised/harassed as a result
- ensure documentation relating to concerns raised under the Trust's Whistleblowing Policy, is maintained, stored securely and remains confidential

6. Trainee Responsibilities

The General Medical Council's guidance on Good Medical Practice states that doctors have an obligation to *“act without delay if you have a good reason to believe that you or a colleague may be putting patients at risk”*.

Trainees raising a concern under whistleblowing have a responsibility to:

- raise the concern immediately rather than waiting for proof or investigating the matter yourself
- raise concerns in good faith, with a true belief that wrongdoing or malpractice have or may have occurred
- not to raise concerns with any malicious intent

7. Confidentiality and Anonymity

Whilst it is possible to raise such matters anonymously trainees should not feel inhibited in identifying themselves and are encouraged to do so as it makes the concern easier to investigate. The Trust is required to make every effort not to disclose their identity without their consent.

If a situation arises where a concern cannot be investigated or resolved without revealing the trainee's identity, or if there is a legal imperative to disclose the identity, the Trust should discuss this with the trainee and decide how the issue will be progressed. This might be where evidence

is needed in court or for an internal disciplinary hearing or where urgent action is needed in order to protect service users or employees from harm.

8. How to Raise a Concern

Trainees are encouraged to raise any concerns with their educational supervisor/programme director in the first instance but where this is not appropriate they should contact the Director of Medical Education. There may be circumstances when it may be appropriate to raise the concerns initially with the Northern Ireland Medical and Dental Training Agency through the Head of School or Postgraduate/Associate Dean.

Any concern raised should be factual and cover the following:

- What has occurred (or thought to have occurred)
- When it occurred
- Where it occurred
- Who was involved
- Have patients/staff/the public been put at risk as a result?
- Has it happened before?
- Are there any other witnesses?
- Is there any supporting information?
- How the matter came to light
- Has it been raised with anyone else? If so, details of when/whom

9. The Investigation

The whistleblower will be informed of the method by which the concern will be progressed and will be advised if his/her further involvement will be required. Advice will be given as to whether the concerns expressed should be dealt with in a more appropriate context such as under the Trust's disciplinary, grievance or complaints procedure or harassment and bullying policy.

The trainee may wish to discuss or seek advice from an independent source such as the BMA and may wish to have a representative or colleague present during any meetings or interviews held in connection with the concerns raised.

In most circumstances the trainee is expected to raise matters of concern internally within the Trust.

On completion of the investigation, providing there are no legal constraints, the trainee will be informed of the outcome of the investigation.

10. Independent Advice

Trainees may wish to seek independent advice from an experienced organisation before blowing the whistle. Free confidential advice is

available from the independent charity Public Concern at Work. Their helpline can be contacted on 02074046609 or by e-mailing helpline@pcaw.co.uk. The helpline provides practical advice on whether or how to raise a concern about a danger or illegality that has been witnessed at work. It will help identify how best the concern can be raised while minimising the risk to the individual and maximising the opportunity for any wrongdoing to be addressed.

Trainees also have the right to consult or seek guidance and support from their professional organisation at any time or seek legal advice of their own choice at their own expense.

11. Support for trainees accused of inappropriate behaviour or malpractice

It is important that trainees accused of wrong doing have access to the right help and support. The Northern Ireland Medical and Dental Training Agency, in keeping with its policy on the “*Management of Trainees Requiring Support*”, will ensure the provision of pastoral support and counseling.

Any decision to refer the trainee to the National Clinical Assessment Service or the General Medical Council/General Dental Council will be taken jointly by the employing authority and the Agency and the trainee will be kept informed.