Whistleblowing case studies

With friends like these...
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Local hero
Jumping the gun
Safety first

Public Concern

NHS Employers

A part of the NHS Confederation working on behalf of the NHS
Sarah is a care assistant in a small, private nursing home and has worked for years with Joan, a senior nurse. They work together on the dementia ward and Sarah considers Joan to be a friend. A month ago, Sarah noticed that Joan had begun to treat everyone in an off-hand way. Sarah did not mind for herself but began to worry about the effect on residents. Sarah heard Joan shout at the residents and then found out that Joan was sedating a particularly difficult resident without a prescription. Sarah tried to speak to Joan but Joan’s only response was that the doctor would prescribe it soon anyway and that she was just giving everyone a bit of peace. One night when a resident got out of bed shouting, Sarah saw Joan put her hands briefly around the woman’s neck before pushing her back to her room. Sarah then heard screams coming from behind the door.

Stop here
Ask staff and managers what they think Sarah should do.

The following day a locum GP was visiting the home and Sarah mentioned to him that she was worried that a colleague was being rough with residents. The GP said Sarah should report it and told her she could get advice from Public Concern at Work.

Sarah rang and we talked her through her options. At first, Sarah said she did not trust the new manager but was worried about what would happen if she went outside the home to the care inspectors. Sarah then said that she thought the manager would take issues of care seriously and PCaW suggested Sarah ask to meet him privately to explain her concerns. The next day Sarah spoke to the manager and he began an immediate investigation. Though initially denying a problem, other staff began to describe incidents that Sarah knew nothing about and Joan was suspended. The police were called in and ten months later Joan was convicted and jailed for two years.
Food for thought

Michael was a biochemist who had recently joined a meat processor, which supplied a major supermarket. Before long, he saw some reject meat being covered with sauce, regraded as good and packaged for the supermarket. When he pointed this out to his managers, he was told it was none of his business.

When Michael was accused by his employer of contacting the supermarket directly, he admitted that he had. He was immediately dismissed. Michael went to a solicitor to bring a legal claim for compensation as he had a young family to support. The solicitor took the claim and suggested Michael call Public Concern at Work for some advice when Michael expressed concern about his future job prospects. We advised him to be honest about what had happened when he sought other jobs. Within months we heard that he had secured another job in the food business. Michael was welcomed by his new managers and colleagues, who thought having an employee who was prepared to do the right thing could only be good for them and their business.

Claire works as a dental nurse in a small rural practice with two dentists and one associate. Six weeks ago she became aware that the associate was fiddling the books. He was meant to provide the practice with half the income he made from his private dental work and from the supplementary charges to NHS patients. On one occasion he told Claire not to record the extra payments he received from NHS patients. Claire refused and recorded the information properly. The dentist then erased the entries Claire had made. Claire gets along well with the partners but knows they like the associate enormously. Claire is worried that the partners might not believe her and that it will permanently sour relationships in such a small practice.

Claire decided to call the health authority who arranged for her to talk to an auditor. After discussing it with Claire, the health authority said it would meet with the partners to explain the concern and suggest they investigate.

The investigation found that the associate had stolen significant sums and he was dismissed with immediate effect. The dentists thanked Claire and told her that she had done the right thing but added that they might have to let her go as they would not have enough work for her until they found a new dentist. Claire worried that it might take a while to attract a new dentist to such a remote area and jobs were scarce. Claire called Public Concern at Work to discuss her options. PCaW agreed to liaise on her behalf with the dentists and the health authority to see if a positive solution could be found. A couple of days later, Claire called PCaW to say that the dentists had realised that they would still have the same workload and that it would be mad to let her go, particularly when she had done them a favour.
Irene took a part-time job as a receptionist at a GP practice when her children began school. Irene had worked for three months when she overheard a female patient telling another receptionist that she did not want to see Dr. Lewis – one of the male GPs – again. The receptionist muttered: “Well, it’s not the first time.” When Irene mentioned this to one of the practice nurses, the nurse told her to ignore her colleague. She thought little more about it until the following week when she took a call from another female patient who refused an appointment with Dr. Lewis. Irene has read a story in the press about a doctor abusing female patients and feels she ought to do something.

When Irene saw a poster in the surgery about Public Concern at Work, she called to ask whether she should tell the GMC or the PCT. PCaW said it would be better if she spoke to the practice manager first. PCaW advised that she have a quiet word with the practice manager first, explaining that with little evidence she may have things out of perspective.

A couple of days later Irene called to say that she had talked to the practice manager, who had thanked Irene for coming to see him. He assured her that there had been no complaints and that Dr. Lewis’s patient list was no different to any other. However, he said he would make a note of the issue and keep an eye on things, and if Irene had any future concerns to let him know as soon as possible.

Stop here
Ask staff and managers what they think Irene should do.

One Thursday in summer, two employees at a pleasure park had a problem with the ride they operated, caused by a defect in the brakes of one of the cars. As required, Ben and Jim reported the defect. However, the following morning they found the brake was still faulty. In addition, a test run showed that an electrical fault had developed which triggered the emergency brakes and so kept halting the ride. The men reported the matter again and were told to run the ride on manual override. When they were also told to sign off the ride as safe, they refused. Management then brought in two inexperienced people to run it instead.

Ben and Jim were very worried, particularly as the park was facing a busy weekend. They walked off the job and called Public Concern at Work to get advice on how to ensure the public danger was averted. As they had already informed their immediate managers of the risk to no effect and thousands of visitors were expected that weekend, PCaW advised Ben and Jim to contact the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) immediately. We also advised them to inform the managing director of their concerns. They asked us to help them draft a fax to the managing director to explain the problem. The fax stated that the HSE had been contacted, and asked the managing director to satisfy himself at the earliest opportunity that the ride was safe. He was urged to err on the side of caution even if it meant closing the ride and disappointing customers.

The HSE’s investigation found there had been problems and insisted that remedial action was taken. Subsequently, the managing director admitted that there had been a safety risk and though he was glad it had been sorted out, he wished the men had felt able to come to him before going to the HSE.