Freedom to Speak Up for the whole dental team

Dr Henrietta Hughes OBE FRCGP says that speaking up can be about anything which gets in the way of you doing a great job.

Freedom to Speak Up is for everybody who works in health. It includes primary and secondary care, independent providers, hospices and national bodies.

The pandemic has had a huge impact on the dental profession and has highlighted how important it is for everyone to be able to speak up safely, know that they will be listened to and the right actions taken. As the pandemic has developed, dental practices

have had to deal with the uncertainty of closures, supply of medication, fears about access to PPE, trying to maintain hygiene and social distancing, as well as considering the wellbeing of patients and colleagues. Speaking up is about all of these things. It is about anything which gets in the way of you doing a great job – and may include concerns and ideas for improvement.

The critical role dental teams are playing, sometimes at personal risk, underlines why it is so vital that workers have the freedom

to speak up. As a GP myself, I recognise the difficulties that speaking up can sometimes bring and as the National Guardian for the NHS I want to make speaking up business as usual – for everyone.

A ‘speak up, listen up, follow up’ culture can have many benefits for dentists and their teams. It can:

- Protect patients and workers
- Foster a learning and improvement culture where everyone is valued
- Improve worker morale, reducing

turnover and attracting great staff with a working environment where bullying, harassment and discrimination are not tolerated.

Yet, whilst organisations may vary in size, structure and business model, the promoters and barriers to speaking up are common to all settings and organisations. Is it safe to speak up? Will I be listened to? Will action be taken or will I be victimised?

'We are all happier and more productive if we believe that mutual trust exists and that our voice matters.'

Learning modules

We have developed Freedom to Speak Up e-learning modules in association with Health Education England, which are freely available to everyone wherever they work in health: <https://www.e-lfh.org.uk/programmes/freedom-to-speak-up/>. They explain in a clear and consistent way what speaking up is and its importance in creating an environment in which people are supported to deliver their best. The first module – Speak Up – is for everybody. The second module, Listen Up, for managers, builds upon the first and focuses on listening and understanding the barriers to speaking up. A final module, Follow Up, for senior leaders will be launched later in the year to support the development of Freedom to Speak Up as part of the strategic vision for organisations and systems.

There are many existing ways for people to speak up, but sometimes people do not want to speak up to their manager or supervisor. They may be fearful that they will be victimised for speaking up or because they have tried to raise matters in the past and been blocked or ignored. Locums, trainees or sub-contractors might feel more vulnerable or not know who to contact.

Guardians

Freedom to Speak Up Guardians provide an alternative channel for people to speak

up to and work proactively to support a positive speaking up culture, one which protects patients and improves the experience of workers.

Guardians act impartially and independently. They thank workers for speaking up, listen, offer support, act to preserve confidentiality where requested and if possible and escalate to the right person so that actions can be taken. They also give feedback to the person who has

spoken up. Guardians have anecdotally described to me the positive impact of speaking up and listening well in their organisations, whether that be a reduction in staff sickness absence, fewer grievances, improved staff survey results and better engagement of senior leaders.

There are already over 650 Freedom to Speak Up Guardians in England, mainly in trusts but also in primary care, independent sector providers and the national bodies. The National Guardian's Office supports this network of guardians through training and guidance and supports the wider health system by facilitating opportunities for sharing and learning, disseminating good practice and providing challenge to tackle barriers to speaking up. Over 50,000 cases have been brought to guardians since we started collecting data.

We are all happier and more productive if we believe that mutual trust exists and that our voice matters. Effective Speak Up arrangements reassure workers that when they speak up, they will be listened to, and leaders will follow up and take the right actions.

You can find out more and how to contact your Freedom to Speak Up Guardian on our website www.nationalguardian.org.uk.

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