

## Press Release

Monday 29 April 2013

### **Hospitals must tackle service failure and build trust by dealing with complaints properly, says Ombudsman**

Systemic problems leading to missed opportunities to learn from mistakes and make NHS hospitals better are highlighted in *The NHS hospital complaints system. A case for urgent treatment?*, published today.

A 2012-13 analysis of the main reasons why patients, their families and carers brought their complaint to the Ombudsman after their hospital has failed to deal with it include poor explanations, no acknowledgement of mistakes, inadequate financial remedy and unnecessary delays.

The Health Service Ombudsman's report comes in the wake of the report by Robert Francis QC on the appalling failings at the Mid Staffordshire Foundation NHS Trust (published in February 2013). The Francis report said: "It [the Board] did not listen sufficiently to its patients or its staff or ensure the correction of deficiencies brought to the Trust's attention."

Far from Mid Staffordshire being an isolated case, the Ombudsman's report shows systemic problems with NHS Hospitals' failing to listen and learn from patients. It gives insight into the problem using the organisation's unique perspective as the service people turn to when hospitals have failed to handle their complaint properly.

Dame Julie Mellor, Health Service Ombudsman, says:

"We know that 64 per cent of people do not believe that complaining will make a difference. One woman was advised to complain in writing about concerns that her mother was not being washed or helped to go to the toilet in hospital. She was told her complaint would be acknowledged within 28 days. 'My Mum could've died in that amount of time', she said."

"People complain because they want to know what has gone wrong, they want an apology and they want to make sure others don't suffer the same problems. We see example after example of cases where hospitals aren't using complaints as the vital source of feedback they are. Learning from patients, improving services and building trust all flow from managing complaints effectively."

The report is the Ombudsman's initial contribution to the Anne Clwyd and Tricia Hart review of the NHS Hospital Complaints system. It highlights failings throughout the patient experience of hospitals.

Failings in access and procedure include:

- patients not being told how to complain or who to complain to
- staff either not knowing about the complaints procedures or (if they do) failing to follow them properly
- poor communication with patients, families and other public services.

Failings in communication and responsiveness include:

- failure to deal with patients and families with compassion and sensitivity
- providing complainants with inaccurate or incomplete information
- not admitting when mistakes have been made and not attempting to put things right.

Failings in leadership and learning include:

- failure by hospital managers and boards to monitor complaints carefully so problems can be spotted early
- failure to take action
- failure to learn from mistakes.

The Health Ombudsman is commissioning two pieces of research as a follow-up to this report. One will be finding out how hospital boards handle and learn from complaints. The other will be identifying good practice in NHS Hospital complaint handling. The findings from this research will be shared widely.

The report *The NHS Hospital complaints system . A case for urgent treatment?* is available from [www.ombudsman.org.uk](http://www.ombudsman.org.uk).  
<http://tinyurl.com/burmu9e>

*Ends*

#### **Notes to editor:**

1 The Health Service Ombudsman was set up by Parliament to help both individuals and the general public. We are not part of the NHS. The Ombudsman's role is to investigate complaints that individuals have been treated unfairly or have received poor service from the NHS or NHS funded services. The service is free to use and open to everyone.

2. If someone is unhappy about the service they have received from the NHS in England they should first make their complaint to the department or organisation in question and give them the chance to respond. If they're not happy with how their complaint is dealt with, they should contact the Ombudsman - call 0345 015 4033 or email [phso.enquiries@ombudsman.org.uk](mailto:phso.enquiries@ombudsman.org.uk).

3. For media enquiries, contact the Ombudsman's Press Office on 0300 061 4996/4272 or email [press@ombudsman.org.uk](mailto:press@ombudsman.org.uk). Out of hours number is 07825 781 289.

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