

# Did ignoring whistleblowers kill 90 people?

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## **Peter Bowbrick**

*(Dr Peter Bowbrick is an economist, an international consultant who has worked in 30 countries around the world, investigating corruption and incompetence in the public sector.)*

Did ninety people die in Maidstone and Tunbridge Wells Trust because the whistleblowers were ignored? Or has the NHS built up a culture where no health care professionals will blow the whistle, because nobody ever acts on their complaints? Or are they just too frightened of what whistleblowing will do to their careers?

My own experience is that the NHS ignores warnings, and the Minister will back them up. Two years ago, I found evidence suggesting gross financial misconduct by two NHS organizations. The amount of money involved would have provided the nurses needed at Maidstone and Tunbridge Wells Trust. I reported this to the regional Strategic Health Authority. Nothing happened. I chased them up and two weeks later they said that they would not investigate. They did offer to pass on my outline of the case to the people I was complaining about – presumably so that they could destroy any evidence. I refused the offer.

I reported it to the Healthcare Commission – the organization which investigated the 90 deaths in Kent. They told me that the fact that I had complained would be passed on to the Central Fraud and Security Management Services. Nothing happened. Two weeks later, I phoned them and they said that they had been meaning to contact me. I sent them details. Nothing happened.

I chased them up two weeks later and they told me that my e-mail outlining the complaint had been passed on to the Regional Operations Fraud Team. Nothing happened.

So I wrote to my MP who forwarded my letter to the Minister. This produced some response: some weeks later the Regional Team manager wrote that he had opened the e-mail and allocated the task to one of his staff.

Eventually, five months after I blew the whistle, an inspector arrived. He was an ex-policeman, who agreed that it should be investigated. Unfortunately, he was so overloaded that he could only investigate a tiny proportion of the complaints. He would not touch anything except an open and shut case that could be completed in three days.

I reported this to my MP who passed my letter to the Minister, who did nothing.

Well, yes, I have seen this sort of thing before: I have investigated corruption and inefficiency in many Third World countries. The effect is the same. The cost to the economy is measured not in millions or billions, but in percentages of the GNP.

If a whistleblowing system is to be effective, each complaint must be investigated immediately. The whistleblowers may have spent months summoning up the courage to speak, and an inspector should call on them at home within twenty-four hours, while they are

still willing to talk. And they should know that their complaints will be investigated and their names will be concealed. All complaints should be investigated.