Healthcare workers advised to be honest and say sorry for mistakes

Nurses and doctors might be afraid to admit their mistakes because they fear they will be disciplined, the Mid Staffs inquiry chair has warned.

Sir Robert Francis said staff who open up about errors and apologise must be ‘praised and valued’, not threatened with disciplinary action.

His comments came at the launch of draft guidance that urges nurses and midwives to be open and honest with patients and own up to mistakes.

The Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC) and the General Medical Council (GMC) have drawn up guidance for nurses, midwives and doctors on fulfilling a professional duty of candour.

Staff must tell patients or their families when something has gone wrong, the guidance states. They should apologise and offer an appropriate remedy or support to put matters right.

The guidance also calls on employers to support staff by creating an open workplace, where people can learn from mistakes so future patients are protected from harm.

The move follows Sir Robert’s call for a more open and transparent culture in the NHS following the Mid Staffs scandal. He is conducting a review into whistleblowing in the health service, which is due to be completed by the end of November.

‘Doing the right thing by way of candour is not always easy,’ Sir Robert told the launch at St Thomas’ Hospital in London last week.

‘There is undoubtedly a fear of disciplinary consequences. I have spoken to people who have told me they have been reported to their regulator for taking time before summoning up the courage to exercise a duty of candour.

Focus on students

‘I hope the regulators will make it clear that this is not the intention of the guidance, because people need a lot of encouragement to do the right thing and threatening them is not the way forward,’ Sir Robert added.

A consultation is open until January 5, and the guidance is expected to be published in March next year.

Health secretary Jeremy Hunt, who also spoke at the launch, said there needs to be a greater focus on training nursing students on their duty to speak up.

Mr Hunt said: ‘Speaking out should be embedded in the training of new doctors and nurses. We are working with training bodies to work this out, but it is challenging because we are trying to train new doctors and nurses to do something different from their elders and the natural instinct is to do things the same way your superiors do.’

Guy’s and St Thomas’ NHS Foundation Trust chief nurse Eileen Sills said trusts should do more to encourage junior staff and nursing students to speak up when they see an error.

‘This week we welcomed 150 first-year nursing students into our trust,’ Professor Sills said. ‘They are the greatest mystery shoppers for us, but if they see an error, I cannot see them being brave enough to put their heads above the parapet unless we create an environment where they can do so.’

To take part in the consultation, go to: www.nmc-uk.org/candour-consultation