

Kim Holt: Putting Patient Safety First

Introduction

Kim Holt was a consultant doctor employed by Great Ormond Street Hospital, a UK National Health Service trust in London. The trust had formed a partnership with Haringey TPCT to provide community paediatric services in Haringey. In 2006, along with three consultant colleagues Kim raised multiple concerns about the poorly-run community paediatric clinic. Under-resourcing, under-staffing and inadequate administrative infrastructure, loss of notes, and a bullying culture put children at risk.

Clinicians raised 60 incidents during 2006 but these did not lead to learning and correction of the systemic problems underpinning the service. Kim went on sick leave in February 2007. In August 2007 a child, Peter Connelly, was seen by a locum paediatrician and two days later he died at the hands of his carers. This child became known as Baby P. The paediatrician was identified by the media which led to a witch hunt. Kim eventually brought her disclosures to a local MP, once she realised that the truth about the departmental resourcing and team dynamics were not being made public.

Management at Haringey PCT figured out immediately who blew the whistle. Kim was kept on special leave from that department for four years before being reinstated in November 2011. Despite experiencing continual victimisation and bullying, Kim was promoted following her return. She returned to work for a new employer because Whittington Health had taken over Haringey community services.

Kim has since then used her influence to tackle issues of co-worker abuse, poor levels of clinic resourcing and patient neglect. She has also supported other people in the NHS who have concerns about patient care, fairness and workplace corruption and set up an organisation to continue this work, Patients First. This campaign group was wound down in 2018 because the demands were impossible to manage with a small group of volunteers. However Kim continues to campaign to improve the system that, she believes, should be protective of NHS staff speaking up.

The disclosure

In the paediatric clinic where had Kim worked, children were being placed at risk by understaffing and ineffective administration. Key medical posts were left vacant. Important child protection schemes had been frozen since 2006. Nursing support in the clinic was lacking. An inadequate administrative infrastructure failed to correctly schedule appointments and properly maintain patient information. Avoidable deaths had occurred. Hospital management successfully covered up underlying flaws during 60 regulator inspections in 2006 that were prompted by Kim and other doctors on the team. Hodes and Sibert Royal College appointed investigators who were very concerned about the clinically unsafe service when they assessed the provision following Baby P death (Sibert report).

It was a massive decision, Kim explains, to seek intervention and make disclosures outside of the NHS. Predicting further fatalities, and because Baby P had been a vulnerable child who did not have parents speaking up for him, she felt compelled to try to prevent further similar incidents. Originally, Kim had faith in the NHS and had not anticipated backlash from management. During the process of speaking up, however, she quickly began to realise that she would likely lose her job. Her local MP took her disclosures seriously and spoke with the Chair of Haringey TPCT. Although Kim's identity remained confidential, the small number of doctors in the clinic made it easy to deduce who had blown the whistle. This resulted in further victimisation against Kim.

Although the politician worked hard to escalate her concerns, Kim's hope that the issues would be rectified dissipated over the years that followed. She turned to the media only in late 2009 after an investigation by NHS London was dragging on and it was clear that the NHS establishment was trying to protect Great Ormond Street rather than ensure real learning took place about Peter Connelly's death. Her MP introduced her to journalists.

She recalls how her first contact with a journalist "was a really scary time". She reminded herself that "the overriding important thing was that people needed to understand what had happened in the service." The bullying against her intensified. Colleagues isolated her. Teamwork and communication broke down. This further threatened patients. When Kim informed the CEO of Great Ormond Street about the reprisals, she was told that she had brought it on herself.

There were no court proceedings in Kim's case, although legal process was used eventually to prevent her from being sacked. Her disclosures were not addressed at the time she and colleagues raised them. The department is now well staffed and has a robust child protection service, vastly superior to the service that was in place in 2007. Kim and colleagues wanted to keep working to fix the clinic from the inside, an opportunity she was granted after a long, tough struggle.

The new role

Kim was determined to continue working in the same department. "It is a point of principle," she noted. Thanks largely to her trade union and her husband, she got her job back in her original hospital four years after disclosing. Staff working at Haringey services were transferred from Great Ormond Street to Whittington Health.

Following Baby P's death there are now 6 paediatricians (full and part time) in Haringey community paediatric team. There is weekly peer review of all cases seen for child protection concerns. There is clinical supervision provided for all the consultants and there is now nursing assistant support. When near misses happen they are reported and looked into and efforts made to tighten the system. There are improved working relationships with social care, and staff are well-motivated to continually improve the service. Having now been promoted a number of times, Kim is today one of the senior safeguarding leads for Haringey CCG, responsible for monitoring and supporting safeguarding across health teams in Haringey. While uniquely suited to this role, she does find the barriers to progress frustrating. "I personally have a lot of influential power... people are much more likely to listen to me... [But] it is slightly depressing in that, despite everything... services are getting further and further stretched, and staff are not necessarily always being cared for."

Supporting NHS whistleblowers and campaigning for cultural change in the NHS are other activities in which Kim engages. Feeling a need to use her profile to effect change, she set up a dedicated organisation. "I found the couple of years where we campaigned [and met] politicians quite energising... I am always being asked to speak to people. We have definitely made a difference."

Factors that helped

Supportive spouse

Trusting by nature, Kim was taken aback when her workplace retaliated harshly. Her husband, an experienced manager in the private sector, was able to coach her through the experience. During her leave, he accompanied her to meetings, helped her to understand the motivations of the other party and helped Kim to pursue her agenda. Late in 2007, for example, her employer attempted to pay her to resign. "[My husband] knew exactly what was going on... he took control of the meeting... I imagine a lot of people in that situation would be very deferential: 'Oh, ok. Ok,' - shocked and not know how to respond." Kim believes support from a partner and colleagues is essential for whistleblower survival. Her husband constantly reminded her that she had not done anything wrong, that her superiors were wrong to treat her badly and that she had to stand up to them. His involvement forced the organisation to eventually offer Kim a secondment. Without him, Kim might not now be working in the public health system.

Listening to her GP and other health professionals

Blowing the whistle in a highly retaliatory environment had a devastating effect on Kim's well-being. The bullying culture of her workplace stemmed from, as Kim puts it, "an inhumane approach to managing," where, as she notes, the attitude in response to doctors' concerns was, "Tough. You've got to get on with it." This management that didn't care about its personnel did not appear to care about its patients either. Helpless and in a double-bind, staff suffered from anxiety. Kim herself had become clinically depressed and her body started to shut down: "I had the insight to realise, 'I am not able to function.'" She recalls that following her GP's advice to take a break from work was one of her best decisions. The leave afforded her time to heal and a safe distance from an abusive environment.

Occupational doctors at the Great Ormond Street Occupational Health department gave Kim psychological support and protection. She cites them as saying that: "unless they [the organization] sort the bullying out... [and] that hostility to you and make sure there's enough doctors in the department... we can't allow you back." The employer "refused to admit it was a toxic environment... Occupational health doctors were saying, 'It's not you. It's the department.'" Having these health professionals by her side and taking their advice helped Kim recover and be fit to return to work.

Financial security

Unlike some whistleblowers, Kim had a number of advantages. First, she was on paid leave for the years she spent out of work. This was because, after her health improved, she was placed on special leave by the Trust, and as such they were obligated to pay her. Most importantly her husband had a good income and was able to support their family during this time. Furthermore, although Kim did

take some legal counsel and bore associated costs, she did not have to meet the significant fees associated with protracted court battles. For these reasons, while the process incurred lost time, loss in career, and health problems, money was never a major stressor in her case. She recognises this is not the way things are for many others. The fact that she was financially secure meant that Kim could focus her efforts on recovering her health and her job, and could possibly take more risks than others.

Professional allies

“You have to have the right people... a coalition of support,” Kim explains. During her absence, the clinic was taken over by another hospital. Her husband had helped her get back into the NHS; now, her trade union convinced the new management to bring her back because they needed doctors like her and she had done nothing wrong. “It is very easy for a story to be built up that I somehow had something to do with what went wrong... By me coming back, it was saying, ‘It wasn't her.’”

Upon re-joining her old workplace, Kim realized that “obviously, the toxicity hadn't been properly addressed.” More work was needed. The reaction of colleagues is mixed nowadays, but it is mostly positive. “Some colleagues were very supportive the whole way through... Some of them have apologised... that happened very recently. Colleagues could see what was going on but they didn't feel able to say anything.”

Moreover, some of Kim's colleagues have revealed to her their covert but active support while she was blowing the whistle. “There's a little group of us, actually, who all were talking to the press, all at the same time. I was the only one doing it publicly.” These others were quietly passing information and evidence to key journalists to support her story. Knowing that she had had allies during her disclosure helped Kim to reintegrate at work.

Journalists and a scandal

Kim believes that the “high profile” nature of her story saved her as a whistleblower. Her predictions that the clinic's mismanagement would lead to other fatalities were correct. “It would have been such a scandal... to get rid of me... It's the high-profile thing: people understood the story, whereas with a lot of other whistleblowers, they find it very hard.”

Having timidly approached journalists initially, Kim found they were one of her greatest career lifelines. “If it wasn't for journalists, I wouldn't be sat here... After [the hospital] promised that I was going to go back to my job, they advertised [her position]... I spoke to the BBC and they immediately phoned them and they pulled the advert straight away.” Today, Kim is still in contact with some journalists that worked on her story. “They had more integrity than a lot of these people in the NHS... they did a public service, as far as I'm concerned.”

Summary: Kim today

Some years after her disclosure, Kim began studying again. She completed a Masters degree in Complex Care and Child Protection at the UK Tavistock Institute, more recently attaining the Nye Bevan NHS leadership award. The reflective work and self-evaluation that this period of study required helped her to process her whistleblowing experiences and to consider her future options. According to Kim, her disclosure journey has left scars of reduced self-confidence, greater distrust of people and a newfound hesitation to engage with the establishment. However, she sees that she has

made an impact, and has contributed to shifting healthcare towards increased compassion and putting patients' needs first. Publicly critical of the lack of transparency in the current health system, she seeks to find new ways to improve it, and collaborators with whom to work towards this. She wants to write a book, campaign more, train others, raise awareness and challenge organisational culture. "We just have to keep batting on [with] it, campaigning, making people realise that shutting people down is not the best way to go forward, that it wastes money, that it's inefficient."