More doctors are raising concerns with GMC about colleagues, MPs hear

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The number of doctors who raise concerns about standards of care and colleagues’ practice is rising steadily, the doctors’ regulatory body has told MPs.

However, the rise has been happening for the past five years and does not seem to have been particularly boosted by Robert Francis QC’s report into poor standards of care at Mid Staffordshire NHS Foundation Trust, which criticised the failure of doctors there to speak up about the trust’s problems.

The issue was raised during an evidence session of the parliamentary health select committee’s annual accountability hearing with the General Medical Council. MPs asked what the regulator was doing to help and encourage doctors to raise concerns about poor standards of care where they worked and the practice of their colleagues in the light of the Francis report.

Niall Dickson, the GMC’s chief executive, giving evidence, said, “We have issued new guidance for mainstream doctors and for leaders within the medical profession about how they should raise inquiries and how they should respond to them. Over the last year we have been actively promoting that guidance.”

The GMC had set up a confidential helpline last year to allow doctors to contact the GMC with concerns that they find difficult to raise at work, he added, and this had received almost 900 calls in its first year, with the council initiating more than 60 inquiries as a consequence of those calls.

“We are sending a signal that raising concerns by professionals is a routine and important part of professional life,” Dickson said. “We do have sticks in our bag, but an awful lot of what we’ve got to do is to work alongside hospitals, employers, and medical organisations in encouraging a change of culture.”

MPs asked whether more doctors were contacting the GMC with concerns since the Francis report had been published.

Peter Rubin, the GMC’s chairman, also giving evidence, said, “We’ve seen an increase in doctors referred to us by other doctors over the last five years. It’s been a year on year increase, and I don’t think there was a very obvious increase around Francis.

“What is most striking for us is that, although complaints in general are going up, the potentially more serious complaints are those from doctors about other doctors.”

Asked whether doctors might be working in a climate that was becoming less tolerant of reasonable human error, Rubin replied, “Medicine is a risky business. The worst thing we could do as a regulator would be to discourage doctors from taking reasonable risks understood by and shared with the patient.

“Over my professional career there has been a huge increase in the likelihood of a doctor having legal proceedings taken against them or being referred to the GMC.”

MPs also asked how revalidation was working, given that it had been in place for a year.

Una Lane, the GMC’s director of registration and revalidation, said, “There is some significant evidence that healthcare organisations are now taking some of their local responsibilities more seriously.

“We see many more doctors who are subject to appraisal than was the case a number of years ago, and we see many more organisations who now have policies in place to identify poor performance at an earlier point in the process and have processes in place to help the reskilling, rehabilitation, and remediation of doctors locally.”