

Greater support is needed to tackle the serious emotional consequences of whistleblowing

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Whistleblowing incidents can have a serious, long-term impact on people's emotional well-being and their colleagues and employers have a responsibility to provide them with the support they need, according to a study in the October issue of the *Journal of Clinical Nursing*.

Australian researchers carried out in-depth interviews with whistleblowers and nurses who had been reported by whistleblowers.

[Alcohol problems](#), nightmares, paranoid behaviour at work and overwhelming distress were just some of the problems reported by the nurses who took part in the study. All were female and they had between two and 40 years of nursing experience.

The team behind the study have extensive experience of whistleblowing issues, having published research into the reasons for whistleblowing, effects on relationships with colleagues, experiences of confidentiality and organisational wrongdoing.

"We already knew from previous research that whistleblowing had a [negative impact](#) on all aspects of an individual's life, but this study highlights how intense and long-lasting the [emotional problems](#) can be" says lead author and nurse researcher Dr Kath Peters from the School of Nursing and Midwifery at the University of Western Sydney.

"The nurses we spoke to talked about overwhelming and persistent distress, acute anxiety, nightmares, [flashbacks](#) and intrusive thoughts."

The authors point out that nurses who blow the whistle may be unprepared for the effect it will have on their personal, physical, emotional and professional well-being. However, they also stress the important role that whistleblowing has played in large-scale inquiries that have led to improvements in healthcare safety and quality.

"Whistleblowing is an issue for all sectors, not just the medical profession" says Dr Peters. "By its very nature it may lead organisations to adopt a defensive stance to protect their own interests and cast those who blow the whistle as troublemakers. This can generate a hostile work environment and even lead to victimisation, ostracism, exclusionary behaviour, hostility and bullying."

Key findings and quotes from the study included:

Participants described overwhelming distress, avoided social occasions and reported loss of confidence and insomnia.

- "I just went into a black space and had to stay in bed with the blankets over my head for a week..." (Evelyn, whistleblower).
- "I started drinking, I would go to bed at six o'clock at night...waking up at two o'clock in the morning and staying awake." (Rosie, whistleblower)
- "I just have this constant dull depressed sort of feeling - it's like a deadness..." (Rita, subject of whistleblowing)
- "I was having panic attacks and hyperventilating and pacing like an absolute lunatic..." (Anna, subject)
- "I was hyper vigilant...I tried to look at every possible way how I might be set up for something..." (Moira, whistleblower)

- "I practiced defensive management... I wrote everything down, I kept a log of every conversation and it was exhausting." (Diana, subject).

The whistleblowing event was all consuming for the nurses who took part in the study.

- "I was wondering what effect it would have on me... I was constantly figuring out ways of dealing with the problem." (Valerie, whistleblower).
- "I had nightmares all the time, when it was at its worst I would just see this man continually, as soon as I closed my eyes..." (Mary, whistleblower)

"What makes this study stand out from our previous research is that it underlines the severity and duration of the emotional distress these women experienced" says co-author Professor Debra Jackson from the Faculty of Nursing, Midwifery and Health at the University of Technology, Sydney.

"We believe that health managers have a significant responsibility to provide ongoing care and support for both whistleblowing employees and those affected by whistleblowing events. Nursing colleagues also need to be vigilant and direct people affected by whistleblowing events to appropriate resources.

"Although this study concerned the nursing profession, we hope that it will lead to a much wider awareness of the effects that whistleblowing can have on individuals and the support mechanisms that organisations need to develop."

More information: The emotional sequelae of whistleblowing: findings from a qualitative study. Peters et al. *Journal of Clinical*

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