The RCN hosted a seminar bringing together student nurses who had personal experience of whistleblowing and raising concerns with Sir Robert Francis, to help inform his review, Freedom to Speak Up.

Student nurses bring a new perspective when they enter clinical environments. They are a fresh pair of eyes, are keen to learn and can provide constructive challenge based on current learning and research. They also frequently spend a considerable amount of time with patients on the ward or in the community.

There are occasions when student nurses see instances of poor and inappropriate care and treatment that fall below the standard they have been taught to expect. When this happens students understand that they have a responsibility to patients, the public and the profession and want to raise these concerns. However, students at the seminar gave powerful and moving accounts of just how difficult this can be, the sense of vulnerability they frequently feel, and their fears of the ramifications and consequences for them personally. Intimidation, bullying and failing assessments were all examples given by students. It was also striking that such similar experiences had been encountered across a range of geographical and clinical settings.

Although there is no doubt that students require courage to raise concerns, students are passionately committed to doing the right thing for patients. They genuinely want to be a positive force for change that will improve care for patients now and in the future. In order to fully support students to make this change a number of specific asks and recommendations were made by those students who attended the seminar. These are:

- **An independent person to speak to about raising concerns** - It is often very difficult for students to raise concerns with their mentor. There should be an independent advice and information service that students can go to for confidential support when they want to raise a concern.

- **Students should be updated throughout and at the end of the process** - At present, the vast majority of students are not kept up to date or informed of the outcome of the concerns they have raised. There should be a formal mechanism that provides feedback to the student when concerns have been raised. This should occur both during and at the end of the process used to consider the concerns.
• **Protection from bullying as a result of raising concerns** - Lead clinicians and ward managers have a responsibility to ensure all staff, including student nurses, are working in an environment that is free from bullying, intimidation, gossiping and harassment directly or indirectly, including through social media. If a student nurse has raised concerns, lead clinicians and ward managers should proactively monitor whether any unacceptable behaviour is being targeted towards them and take appropriate action if necessary. If the concern relates to the ward manager or senior staff, matters should be escalated to a lead clinician outside the ward to ensure students are being protected from bullying.

• **Training and support from Universities** - All universities should cover raising concerns in the nursing curricula. Universities have a responsibility to help and support students when they raise concerns. Support should be provided throughout any informal or formal raising concerns or whistle blowing process and consist of both practical and emotional assistance. Universities should also ensure that students have the opportunity to reflect on their placements, including when they raise concerns. Best practice examples could include regular group sessions, buddying or student representatives to ensure students have the support network in place to help them through these difficult situations.

• **Students should not fail assessments solely as a result of raising concerns** - The threat, either real or perceived of failing a placement as a direct result of raising a concern is a major deterrent to students speaking up. It is unacceptable to suggest, imply, or actually fail a student on a placement solely on the basis that they have raised a concern.

• **A student’s future employment should not be affected by raising concerns** - In many cases undergraduate and postgraduate students undertake more than one placement in the same setting, and often they may be seeking future employment in a hospital where they have been trained. When a student applies for a job and is not shortlisted the student should always be given feedback as to why they were not successful. Under no circumstances should a student not be shortlisted on the basis of having raised a concern.

• **Raising concerns guidance for students** - The NMC guidance on raising concerns does apply to student and pre-registration nurses, and this should be covered by the nursing curricula. However, in practice there is concern that students are currently falling between the gaps between health education institutions, the NMC and providers of healthcare. The NMC should acknowledge that there are issues specific to students who are a critical group on the journey to becoming registrants and offer further guidance specifically to them as the next generation of nurses.
• **Students should always be advised they can seek help from the RCN, another trade union or professional regulator** - Students should always be notified by their university that they can seek additional support and advice from a trade union or professional regulator. If students are explicitly advised not to seek such advice this should be an alarm bell and a reason in itself to students to seek RCN and/or trade union advice.

• **Recognition for raising concerns** – Given the significant barriers and challenges that exist to raising concerns there should be some form of public and professional recognition of students who speak up or whistle blow that then leads to improvements in the culture and/or care of an organisation.