

Blow the whistle carefully!



Dr Reg Broekman*

There have been a number of incidents recently where 'whistle-blowers' have received harsh treatment from those in authority – who ought to have been pleased with the exposure of the particular problem. It is also of note that a fairly frequent practice in newspaper articles is for reporters to use terms like 'ratted' when describing the actions of the 'whistle-blower'. These responses indicate a deep societal antipathy to those who desert their friends or associates, especially in times of trouble, or who divulge secret information, or who betray the trust of colleagues - even when it is 'the right thing to do'.

Our society is complex. It is apparently very easy for people, even in very junior positions, to find ways of appropriating for themselves some benefits which are not their due. Nurses can 'charge' patients for bedpans. Clerks can pocket patient fees. Drivers can use official vehicles as taxis. Sometimes these actions seem relatively innocuous as 'nobody suffers' from them. This perception is clearly untrue. There is no 'victimless crime'. Usually the victims are the general public in the long run, and often the poorest of these are the easiest targets.

Becoming aware of a wrongdoing places an obligation on citizens to report and expose the action or activity. Doing so exposes the citizen to various possible personal risks, such as revenge originating from the culprit, or from others who are involved in the criminal or unethical practice.

The anonymous 'leaking' of information to newspapers or opposition political parties usually has the desired effect of exposing the issue, but tends to cause those who will be required to manage the situation to go into a 'self-protection' or 'defensive' mode. Rather than addressing the problem, energies are expended on tracing the informant and initiating disciplinary processes.

In order to minimize personal risks for the 'whistle-blower', perhaps the first step should be to seek legal advice. For doctors, such advice is available, free of charge, through the normal insurance package offered by the Medical Protection Society. Nurses can apply for assistance through the Nursing Association. Failing this, the matter should be discussed with a trusted senior colleague who could advise on how the matter should be handled. The informed consent of a spouse and/or church minister prior to the disclosure could prove very valuable in dealing with the personal consequences of 'whistle-blowing' when the whistle-blower becomes a target of ridicule, abuse or disciplinary action.

Above all, it is important that the motive for blowing the whistle should be that 'justice must be done', rather than an opportunity to score points politically or within the organization. Wrong motives have a habit of causing good actions to backfire. Unfortunately, if we are to diminish crime in our country, whistles must be blown. It is said "for crime to flourish, all that is necessary is for good people to do nothing".

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