

Hundreds of nurses and other health workers disciplined over sex assaults or abuse

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Hundreds of nurses, paramedics, health and care workers have been **disciplined over allegations of sexual assault**, including incidents involving child sexual abuse, The Independent can reveal.

It comes as the government begins a year-long inquiry into the sexual abuse of dead patients by “morgue monster” David Fuller.

Charities claim the true scale of the issue is likely to be hidden by “vast underreporting” while safeguarding experts say there is no “uniformity” in how NHS trusts handle such cases.

The Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC), which regulates just under 300,000 workers including paramedics, occupational therapists, psychologists and physiotherapists, has taken action on 154 occasions following 293 investigations carried out into allegations of sexual assault or abuse since 2012, according to figures obtained by The Independent.

Fifty-three clinicians were struck off, 20 were cautioned and a further 29 were either suspended, had restrictions placed on their practice or agreed to be removed from registration. More than half of the actions followed allegations of sexual abuse of a child patient.

Most of the cases are from 2019 onwards as the regulator did not systematically record this data prior to this.

Separate data from Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC), which has more than 700,000 registered nurses and midwives shows action was taken 113 times in the past four years against nurses and midwives who did not maintain professional boundaries; in more than 80 per cent of those cases, the clinician was struck off.

Data for the General Medical Council (GMC), which regulates doctors, was not available in time for publication.

Chief executive for Rape Crisis UK, Jayne Butler told The Independent: “It’s **deeply concerning to hear the number of reports of sexual assault from healthcare providers, particularly considering the fact that they are often responsible for the welfare of highly vulnerable people.**

“We know that sexual violence as a crime is vastly **underreported**, so these statistics are unlikely to be representative of the real figure. What this speaks to is the **need for rigorous safeguarding measures** in place and a **proper process for reporting any sexual misconduct**. It’s **crucial that any victim or survivor that comes forward is given access to specialist support** and that **all complaints are taken seriously**.”

“No one should have to go through the trauma of experiencing sexual violence, to experience this at the hands of those who are meant to support and care for you is a total violation of trust. There needs to be a serious investigation as to why and how this is being allowed to happen, and clear measures for what is going to change.”

One NHS trust worker responsible for safeguarding told The Independent there is a lack of “uniformity” over procedures and a lack of central NHS guidance for hospitals in managing sexual allegations against staff.

In November, The Independent revealed how the Care Quality Commission (CQC) had recently raised specific concerns of the risk of sexual assault to patients treated by some private ambulance providers.

The spotlight on sexual safeguarding intensified after Fuller, a hospital electrician, was found to have sexually abused corpses within NHS hospitals. He is serving a life sentence for his crimes.

The CQC began collecting data on “**sexual safety**” concerns – ranging from sexually inappropriate behaviour to serious sexual assault – in August 2020. Figures show it received more than 2,800 such alerts in the first year of data, up to August 2021. The number includes 1,835 concerns involving social care services and 902 about private mental health providers.

A spokesperson for the HCPC said: “Protecting patients and service users is at the heart of our work as a multi-profession regulator. Nothing is more important. Sexual misconduct is an extremely serious matter and we treat such allegations accordingly. We set out clearly the standards we expect, and we work closely with employers, professional bodies and others to ensure those standards are met.

“We encourage patients, service users, employers and registrants themselves to raise with us any concerns they may have about our registrants’ standards of practice. We thoroughly investigate all such concerns and take action as appropriate.”

The HCPC added that government reforms were a “golden opportunity” to increase collaboration and data-sharing among regulators and strengthen patient safety.

A spokesperson for the CQC said: “While the majority of health and social care services are delivered in a safe environment, we know that more can be done to ensure the sexual safety of both staff and people receiving care. That’s why, we have been working with partner organisations to highlight the issue and support efforts to improve the approach to sexual safety across health and care.”

The CQC said it was “vital” people using services and staff feel safe and have confidence any concerns will be followed up quickly and effectively.

Tom Scott, interim executive director of professional regulation at the NMC, said: “**Sexual misconduct has no place in society or in health and social care**, and we take allegations involving registered nursing and midwifery professionals very seriously. Anyone found by our panels to have committed sexual misconduct is highly likely to be removed from our register.”

If you have been affected by any of the issues raised in this article, you can contact Dignity4Patients, whose helpline is open Monday to Thursday 10am to 4pm.