

NHS staff face sack if they discuss religion

All National Health Service employees risk losing their job if they discuss their religious beliefs with colleagues or patients, The Daily Telegraph has learnt.

By Martin Beckford and Caroline Gammell

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Caroline Petrie has been told she can return to work. Photo: JAY WILLIAMS

Following overwhelming public support for Caroline Petrie, the Christian nurse who was suspended after she offered to pray for an elderly patient, her employers have caved and said she could return to her job.

The row over her treatment has reached the House of Commons, with Sir Patrick Cormack, the Tory MP for South Staffordshire, claiming that her case had highlighted the "utter absurdities" of political correctness.

Although Mrs Petrie was relieved her ordeal was over, fears have been raised that new rules could lead to the dismissal of any health care worker who tries to talk about their faith to others.

A little-noticed document published by the Department of Health last month gives warning that attempts by doctors or nurses to preach to other staff or patients will be treated as harassment or intimidation under disciplinary procedures.

But it does not make clear the limits of acceptable discussion about religion.

Faith groups said the guidelines were so vague that they could mean action could be taken against anyone who talks about their beliefs to fellow workers or patients.

The document, called Religion or Belief: A Practical Guide for the NHS, states: "Members of some religions... are expected to preach and to try to convert other people. In a workplace environment this can cause many problems, as non-religious people and those from other religions or beliefs could feel harassed and intimidated by this behaviour.

"To avoid misunderstandings and complaints on this issue, it should be made clear to everyone from the first day of training and/or employment, and regularly restated, that such behaviour, notwithstanding religious beliefs, could be construed as harassment under the disciplinary and grievance procedures."

Last night Dr Peter Saunders, the general secretary of the Christian Medical Fellowship, said: "Much of the ethos of the NHS arose in a Christian environment, and many of the great pioneers in medicine were people who were motivated by a very strong Christian faith. It is quite ironic that people seem to be seeing Christian belief as something unhelpful.

"We live in a post-Christian society and that's fine as long as we don't end up with a system where people are actually discriminated against, bullied and not allowed to express their Christian values.

“One of our cherished freedoms is that of freedom of speech, which enables us to have important debates about crucial issues. But we’re seeing a culture of thought police emerging where it seems no longer acceptable to express what are really just orthodox Christian beliefs or the exercise of Christian conscience.”

Neil Addison, a Roman Catholic barrister who specialises in religious discrimination cases, asked: “To what extent do you stop ordinary conversation? What they’re doing is saying you cannot even talk about religion and that means a whole area of human experience is cut off.”

The controversy began in December when Mrs Petrie, a community nurse, visited a patient in Winscombe, Somerset, and asked if she would like her to pray for her. The woman said she was “taken aback” by the suggestion and told another nurse about it.

Mrs Petrie, a Baptist from Weston-super-Mare, insists praying is just her way of saying “get well soon”, but she was suspended without pay by North Somerset Primary Care Trust. It said she had breached her professional code by “promoting causes that are not related to health” and by failing to “demonstrate a personal and professional commitment to equality and diversity”.

The trust carried out an internal investigation that could have led to her being sacked, but yesterday it issued a statement which said Mrs Petrie could keep her job.

It said: “It is acceptable to offer spiritual support as part of care when the patient asks for it. But for nurses, whose principal role is giving nursing care, the initiative lies with the patient and not the nurse.”

Last night Mrs Petrie said: “I am not sure what I think about this, I want to know what conditions there are to me coming back to work.”

The Department of Health said: “The guide recognises that for some groups evangelising is part of their religious practice, which for some staff or patients can cause offence or discomfort. [It] suggests, to avoid misunderstanding or complaints, that as part of staff induction staff are made aware that this practice could be construed by some patients or staff as harassment.

“Feedback from trusts that were part of the consultation exercise for the guide indicated that this was a real issue, and something on which they were seeking guidance.”

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/newstoppers/religion/4530384/NHS-staff-face-sack-if-they-discuss-religion.html>