Whistleblowers

WORKING with whistleblowers was the topic of May’s London Freelance Branch meeting. Eileen Chubb, who founded Compassion in Care, has moved from being a whistleblower to be an investigative journalist and join London Freelance Branch. With her was her colleague Christine England. Starting work as a care assistant in a care home in Bromley 20 years ago, Eileen said “I loved my job… everything was wonderful until I saw the first person being hit. It seemed the norm to hit people and scream at them.” Eileen described a “ring of abusers” at work. She and colleagues immediately raised it with management, then “went outside… to Social Services”. They were the first group to use the Public Interest Disclosure Act, although she says “the law does not protect people.”

Eileen was “saved by the Daily Express”, who “named all the abusers” and Private Eye, who “followed it for years all the way through”.

Since Compassion in Care (CIC) was set up, 5000 whistleblowers have come to it. It’s spun off The Whistler, dealing with whistleblowing outside healthcare, since workers from other professions – the army, the police, education – made contact over issues common to all these sectors.

The “barriers to justice” are enormous for whistleblowers. According to Christine, “nine out of ten whistleblowers never make it to court.” Most are expected to represent themselves. Getting justice, according to Eileen, “really does rely on negotiation between you and the employer on how much you want to settle for to keep quiet”. She’s “never came across a whistleblower who would take any amount of money to keep quiet.”

Most whistleblowers are not sacked, she says, but forced out of their jobs – their “lives made a misery”. Eileen described being spat at, not being paid “by mistake” and facing someone who’s never been to the media. Christine adds that if you don’t protect your sources, whistleblowers won’t come to you – and so wrongdoers and abusive people will thrive in the shadows.

It takes time to build trust between whistleblowers and journalists. It took Eileen three months to get one group of whistleblowers to give names. She also recommends running the final draft of your story past your whistleblower.

Crack troops: send your unfair contracts now!

Recent NUJ President Tim Dawson updated the June Branch meeting on the campaign to row back publishers’ payment-on-publication policy (see the May Freelance). He has met the new Small Business Commissioner Paul Uppal who was “incredibly keen”. “Late payment,” Tim reported, “is the single greatest impediment to the economy taking off into the stratosphere and we are the crack troops who will lead the charge” against it. To take this forward the Freelance appeals for reports of late payments through www.londonfreelance.org/rates/submit and for you to send examples of unfair contracts that have been imposed on you to unfair@londonfreelance.org