

# The inconvenient truth of Dr Li Wenliang and other courageous health service whistleblowers

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## Employment Law News

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**The inconvenient truth of Dr Li Wenliang and other courageous health service whistleblowers**

Li Wenliang was the brave Chinese doctor whose face we remember poignantly, covered in an oxygen mask in his hospital bed as he battled Covid-19. He had blown the whistle on a Chinese social media blog, Weibo, on the SAR like symptoms he was witnessing in patients in Wuhan, China, in December 2019. He was then detained by Police for spreading false rumours and forced to sign an admission that he had seriously disrupted social order and broken the law.

He texted the New York Times from his hospital bed stating, "If the officials had disclosed information about the epidemic earlier, I think it would have been a lot better". There should be more openness and transparency."

Having caught the virus from patients he was treating for glaucoma, he died of Covid-19 on 7 February 2020, aged 34.

This week Dr Li Wenliang was exonerated by China's highest anti-corruption agency who found that he had not disrupted public order, rather, that he was a professional who had fought bravely and made sacrifices.

The retaliation faced by Dr Wenliang from the Chinese authorities ultimately turned him into a hero however, his story is analagous to many healthcare whistleblowers around the world.

In late December 2019, several Chinese genomics companies tested samples from sick patients in Wuhan and noticed alarming similarities between their illnesses and the 2002 SARS virus. The researchers alerted Beijing of their findings, and on 3 January 2020 received a gagging order from China's National Health Commission, with instructions to destroy the samples.

China's official statistics on Covid-19 presently stand at 81,054 cases, 3,261 deaths and 72,440 people having recovered.

**UK**

In the UK, The Telegraph newspaper reported medical staff raising concerns about inadequate testing of health care workers, shortages of protective equipment and a limited supply of ventilators, putting doctors in the invidious position of deciding who to treat. This week, the Doctor's Association pleaded that in the absence of protective equipment that meets the World Health Organisation's guidance, doctors on the front-line feel like 'lambs to the slaughter.

A study also released this week by [Imperial College](#), London, indicated that the number of critical care beds (and ventilators) could exceed 50,000. Even if enough ventilators were available, the machines require round-the-clock attention by trained doctors and nurses, and doctors said they feared a shortage of qualified staff.

In a speech to the Royal Society of Medicine last year, Matt Hancock, Health Secretary said that "Making someone choose between the job they love and speaking the truth to keep patients safe is morally abhorrent and operationally foolish".

How we treat whistleblowers is a barometer of a civil society. Listen to the frontline in the battle against Covid-19, protect them whilst they endure and forsake their own well-being for the benefit of others, and we will all be healthier and safer in the long-term.

**[Arpita Dutt](#), Partner and [Samantha Prosser](#), Senior Associate, at BDBF are experts in advising whistleblowers, including senior medical professionals in the NHS and private practice.**

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