**Ambulance News Desk**

International

**MALCOLM ALEXANDER'S INTERVIEW WITH AMBULANCE NEWS**

**MALCOLM ALEXANDER INTERVIEW 06 JANUARY, 2021**

In his first interview in 2021 with people who make a difference in the ambulance industry, David Davis, Editor, *Ambulance News Desk*, talks with Malcolm Alexander, former Lecturer on Public Involvement at Westminster University; expert in healthcare services and notable campaigner as the outspoken Founder of the Patients’ Forum for the London Ambulance Service.

**The “Friendly Critical” Ambulance Campaigner**

**DD: What briefly is your background and why/when did you form the Patients Forum for The London Ambulance Service?**

**MA*:***I ran the Community Health Council in Southwark for 15 years from 1987 to 2002, and then became Director of the statutory Association of CHCs for England and Wales.

When the Government abolished statutory Patient Forums for all NHS hospital and Ambulance Services in 2007, we decided to continue ours as a company, and it has been running very successfully for 17 years because we had great relationships with a succession of Chief Executives.

**DD: The Forum’s function was to essentially be “a critical friend” to the LAS. This is clearly a sensitive function. The relationship lasted for 17 years … how would you describe it and what happened to bring it to an end?**

**MA*:***We had an outstanding relationship with the LAS. We were warmly welcomed into all aspects of service development, sat on 10 internal Committees, attended Board Meetings, and monitored services via ride-outs, visits to EOC and 111.

We formed a Joint Committee for education called the Patient and Public Involvement Panel, lecturing to staff on the importance of the public voice and invited LAS staff to speak at our monthly public meetings. Our relationship was an example of outstanding public involvement practice.

The Forum is an independent body and is still running, but the current LAS management found it too difficult to cope with criticism and monitoring from patients and the public. They told us that they did not want to be monitored by us, they were embarrassed that we highlighted their failure to consult the public on their Strategy and they didn’t like our campaign to stop ambulance queuing outside A&E Departments.

They refused to let us use their Conference Room for our meetings, blocked our contacts with LAS staff, closed the PPIP Public Involvement Education Panel, failed to respond to our recommendations for service improvements, banned us from monitoring activities and attempted to discredit the Forum. They have withdrawn documents, that we used to receive monthly, on LAS performance - and refuse to answer questions about their services.

**DD: There are those who would say you were too aggressive in carrying out your role and had become “too much of a critical friend”.  How would you respond to such criticism?**

***MA:***  This claim is ‘fake news’. The LAS is the first body ever to have attempted to discredit an organisation of 50 volunteers dedicated to supporting an NHS body. Our members spent hours/days carrying out supportive reviews of the LAS before CQC visits and supported them in every possible way. Organisations that can’t bear to be monitored, have something to hide in my view.

No member of the Forum has ever been aggressive toward the LAS – if they were, they would be expelled from the Forum. Nobody in the LAS ever suggested that we were too much of a friend or too critical. Apart from the senior executives we had a fantastic relationship with hundreds of staff, and still do – but staff are afraid to challenge their leadership.

**DD:** **The LAS has now set up its own group to replace the Forum, which indicates that there is no chance to re-establish the relationship, doesn’t it?**

**MA:** The Forum has not been replaced. We are an independent body, but our activities have been blocked. The LAS PPI Council is an internal body that has no power or influence in the LAS. It is a PR stunt. Members of the Council tell us that it is a talking shop and has changed nothing.

The LAS is not acting in compliance with the NHS Constitution, or even the most basic level of good practice. They disregard NHSI advice on effective public involvement. We are changing our practice, working more nationally, and we have carried out monitoring visits in the Midlands and Bristol.

We shall rebuild the Forum considering how we work with an organisation that is uncomfortable with public scrutiny and monitoring.

**DD: What’s the future for the Forum now?**

**MA:**We have large numbers of very loyal members who want to establish a good, effective working relationship with the LAS, but we shall not give up our independence. The LAS needs to listen to the public voice, hear from patients and reflect on how to upgrade service that are performing poorly. They also need to respond to our numerous service improvement recommendations.

I am Chair of Hackney Healthwatch, and I will be calling on HW across London to develop an effective means of monitoring the LAS and holding it to account.

A public body that is scared to be monitored is in my view a threat to public safety. By resuming our previously unique and successful relationship, the LAS will demonstrate that it intends to recover its reputation – which has been affected by its unorthodox behaviour.

We love the LAS and all their brilliant frontline staff. We shall be back soon.

**Editor’s Note:**

In June 2020, London Ambulance Service launched a Public and Patients Council, which brings together a wide range of patients and the public representatives from across London at regular intervals to provide feedback on the care we provide and to help shape the way care is delivered.

The Council provides a voice for patients, the public and carers in the design, development, and delivery of Trust activities.  It has 20 members, two co-chairs and an ‘interim’ chair – Dame Christine Beasley, previously the Chief Nurse for England.