

PATIENTS' FORUM

AMBULANCE SERVICES (LONDON)

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PATIENTS' FORUM NEWSLETTER



FROM COURTNEY GRANT: FORUM LEAD ON STROKE AND HUMAN FACTORS

MY EXPERIENCE OF STROKE CARE IN THE LAS

Many thanks for the opportunity to share my experiences with the Patients' Forum and the wider community. I want to demonstrate how they helped me push for much needed service improvements in the London Ambulance Service, after my partner's experiences in 2014.

CONTEXT

In April 2014, my partner and mother of my child (our son was three weeks shy of his second birthday at the time) collapsed at work.

Paramedics swiftly arrived on the scene, but despite her having no prior history of this, claimed that she was: "just having an anxiety attack".

She could not speak at all, and could barely move her right arm or right leg. After they had been on the scene for over an hour, they feared that her condition could be more

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serious than first thought. They performed the FAST test but said that this was “inconclusive” because she was “unable to speak (so her speech could not be assessed)”. They performed the FAST test once again, but came to the same view.

They performed the FAST test a third and final time, and came to the same view once again. This time though, they fortunately took her to a Hyper-Acute Stroke Unit at King’s, to “err on the side of caution”. The HASU confirmed that she had suffered a massive stroke. She was inches from death. She needed to have one third of her skull cut away. Her brain needed this space to swell. If they had not done this, she would have died. My partner is now severely disabled and she was only 31 years old at the time that she suffered a stroke.

MY FORMAL COMPLAINT TO THE LAS

My younger brother, who worked for my partner, saw everything that happened. Other people who were also on the scene also described what happened. I made a formal complaint to the LAS.

LAS RESPONSE TO MY FORMAL COMPLAINT:

“WE DO NOT HAVE ANY CONCERNS ABOUT THE CLINICAL CARE PROVIDED”

I was not happy with the LAS’s response, but I came very close to just giving up and accepting it, purely because I was seriously struggling to cope with this new life that I found myself in. Not only had my partner been within inches of losing her life and would now be severely disabled for the rest of her life, I also found out that our son had a speech delay.

This is a very important point, because it shows why the Patients’ Forum is so important to families going through extreme trauma, because it is very challenging and overwhelming to try and push for much needed service improvements alone.

MY INVESTIGATIONS

As a Human Factors Specialist by profession, I know how to systemically identify the root causes of incidents and how to develop solutions. I learned everything I could about stroke care, the London Ambulance Service’s stroke care package, and about the FAST test (Facial drooping, Arm weakness, Speech difficulties Time to call 999). I spoke to leading experts on stroke, both in the UK and internationally, all of whom said that being unable to speak is a definitive indicator and warning sign of stroke.

I also found a London Ambulance Service article (March 2014 - Clinical Update) written by Neil Thomson (Deputy Medical Director at the time), saying that being “unable to speak” is a definitive warning sign of stroke. The article even expressed concerns that a number of Paramedics were missing the signs of stroke, because they were using the speech element of the FAST test incorrectly. It included the following as an example of using the FAST test incorrectly:

“FAST NEGATIVE...Unable to assess speech as NOT TALKING”.”

This article was published just a month before my partner's appalling experience with the LAS. After learning that a number of Paramedics were missing the signs of stroke because they were incorrectly using the speech element of the FAST test, I felt disturbed and uncomfortable. Given that this is exactly what happened to my partner, why did the LAS put into writing that they had no concerns about the clinical care that they provided to my partner?

ACHIEVING CHANGE

I decided to attend the next London Ambulance Service Board meeting (which is open to the public), in the hope that I could talk face-to-face with the LAS Directors about this discrepancy. It was there that I met Malcolm Alexander, Chair of the London Ambulance Service Patients' Forum.

Ever since that point, Malcolm has been a tower of strength, and provided me with an invaluable link to the London Ambulance Service's Directors and senior clinical staff.

The Patients' Forum arranged a meeting with the LAS Chief Executive / Medical Director – Dr Fionna Moore - and the Director of Operations, which started a process of getting the LAS to make substantive improvements to their stroke care.

The Patients' Forum ensured that the LAS gave me access to the Paramedics' statements about the incident. The underlying Human Factors issues became much clearer after reading these. I put together a document illustrating how to improve the speech element of the FAST test on the Patient Report Form (PRF) from a Human Factors perspective, which should reduce the risk of Paramedics incorrectly interpreting the speech element of the FAST test.

I also presented my case to the Parliamentary Health Service Ombudsman, who subsequently upheld my case against the London Ambulance Service (the PHSO confirmed that the LAS's care to my partner amounted to service failure).

I also wrote to the Mayor of London about the systemic issues with pre-hospital stroke care. Boris Johnson (Mayor of London at the time) expressed his personal sadness about my partner's experience, and the Deputy Mayor wrote to the Chief Executive of the LAS about the wider issue of Paramedics missing the signs of stroke on the speech element of the FAST test. The LAS then provided the Mayor of London with a substantive response confirming that they would now make substantial improvements.

Later, Dr Moore and Briony Sloper, the Deputy Director of Nursing and Quality, also came to our home to personally apologise to my partner for the mistakes made by the LAS – fulfilling their Duty of Candour.

REAL PROGRESS

I now serve as the Human Factors Lead for the Patients' Forum (as well as being their 'stroke lead'). The Forum arranged a meeting with the LAS Deputy Medical Director, Neil Thompson and his training team, and I worked with the LAS to develop a stroke training video for all front-line staff. This has been well received by Paramedics and Emergency Ambulance Crews. I also did an Ambulance 'ride-out' in 2019, where one of the Paramedics I worked with championed the stroke video as hard-hitting and extremely beneficial.

CO-PRODUCTION IN ACTION

The London Ambulance Service Patients' Forum Annual Report states "data on LAS performance on stroke care has improved enormously."

I can't imagine how difficult it would have been to push to make these improvements a reality without the invaluable help and support of the Patients' Forum. If I had given up after receiving the LAS' response to my complaint, because I was so overwhelmed by my personal circumstances and felt so isolated and alone in trying to bring about change - would we have seen these improvements?

If I had given up, another family might have had to go through the same experience. I can say that from my own experience that the Patients' Forum provides a tower of strength, and practical action, that is much needed to push for change and improvement to the London Ambulance Service.

SIGNS OF STROKE - FAST

- **Face:** Can the person smile? Has their face fallen on one side?
- **Arms:** Can the person raise both arms and keep them there?
- **Speech problems:** Can the person speak clearly and understand what you say? Is their speech slurred?
- **Time:** If you see any of these three signs, it's time to **call**

Act **FAST** and call 999.



Facial
weakness



Arm
weakness



Speech
problems



Time
to call 999

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www.patientsforumlas.net/co-production-in-the-las.html