

After Labour veteran Ann Clwyd's complaints are spurned by the hospital where her husband died 'like a battery hen' ...



If the NHS bullies an MP like this, heaven help the rest of us

by Harriet Sergeant

YESTERDAY, the hospital where Ann Clwyd's husband died issued an official report dismissing her claims against it.

The Labour MP is the latest in a long list of patients and their families who the NHS feels it can ignore with impunity.

This is despite the fact that this courageous widow grieving for her beloved husband stood up in Parliament determined to expose the 'indifferent' and 'callous' staff and the lack of care that she claimed caused his death.

It is despite the fact that David Cameron was so impressed by her first-hand experiences that he asked her to overhaul the complaints system of the NHS.

It is despite the fact that her harrowing testimony brought forth a flood of letters from the public telling similar stories of neglect. That cuts no ice with University Hospital of Wales, Cardiff.

Owen Roberts might have died like 'a battery hen', shoved up against the bars of his tiny bed, his feet hanging over the edge, bereft of even socks or a blanket to keep him warm, according to his wife.

But the investigation by hospital staff, overseen by an independent panel of experts, dismissed 21 of the MP's 31 complaints as unproven or by saying 'insufficient evidence to uphold this concern.'

Anyone who has made a complaint to the NHS, whether questioning an indifferent nurse or making a more formal accusation, knows the response they will get only too well — a barrage of doublespeak designed to confuse and weary you.

Only once in the report into Owen Roberts' death does the doublespeak falter. That is when it knocks up against the fact he was waited 27 hours in A&E and then died of hospital acquired pneumonia.

"This concern is upheld except that it is not upheld that there was a lack of care and attention," is the hospital's response.

Go wonder at that one. George Orwell, the writer who invented the phrase doublespeak in his novel 1984, could not

Our caring service has turned into a malign force

have put it better. Taking on the NHS is not for the faint-hearted, as Ms Clwyd is discovering. Our health service seems to have reached new levels of paranoia.

When I was investigating the NHS for the Centre of Policy Studies ten years ago, managers did not know what was going on in their hospitals because they rarely visited a ward or asked patients about their experiences. They could at least claim ignorance and hope the whole thing would go away.

Now, instead of instead of responding to complaints, the NHS turns aggressively on the person daring to complain.

Our caring service has become more like something out of an airport thriller — a vast, malign organisation bullying patients and their loved ones, threatening whistleblowers and spending huge sums of taxpayers' money to grind them down.

Just this week it emerged that University Hospitals Coventry and Warwickshire NHS Trust spent £6 million on legal fees, employed a PR firm and even set private detectives to dig dirt on Dr Raj Mattu, a heart surgeon who had spoken out about the dangerous conditions on his wards. That is all he had done.

For that, as his lawyer said, he was 'vilified, bullied and harassed out of a job he loved'.

Ann Clwyd does not work for the NHS, but the organisation has done its best to hit her where it hurts. She has accused hospital bosses of an 'outrageous breach of confidentiality' by publishing detailed information about her husband's death.

As she said: 'No one is going to make a complaint in future if their personal details are going to be made public in this way.'

The NHS being essentially a political organisation. Ms Clwyd also finds herself under fire from her own party.

Recently Wales's First Minister

Carwyn Jones launched a stinging attack on her for critical comments made about the Welsh NHS — saying she had 'no evidence and no facts' to back up allegations of a crisis in the service.

The Labour Welsh Assembly Member Lynne Neagle was outraged at Ms Clwyd's concerns about the high mortality rates in some Welsh hospitals.

She accused Ms Clwyd of 'denigrating' the Welsh NHS and warned that 'she should stop'.

Actually, no, she shouldn't. What should stop are the high mortality rates. But that is unlikely to happen any time

soon, given the fact that Labour's Welsh Assembly Members have voted against inviting her to give evidence to an influential Welsh Assembly committee.

Where the UK Coalition asked her to lead an inquiry, the Welsh Labour government has blocked and denigrated her.

Her facts were good enough to alarm Sir Bruce Keogh, Chief Medical Officer for England, but not Welsh Labour MPs.

Ann Clwyd has discovered that patients come a very poor second to propagating the NHS myth.

How crucial that myth is we saw in spades at the Olympic opening

The truth about Mid Staffs came out by accident

ceremony. Its artistic director Danny Boyle would have us believe that the health service is stuffed with lovely, dancing nurses in starched caps who read stories to sick children. Dream on.

Many of our elderly patients would be pathetically grateful for a nurse that paused long enough at their bedside to offer them a drink — never mind bedtime stories.

The response of assembly members and hospital boards is typical. I came across it when investigating the NHS over nine months.

My accounts of what I had seen were also dismissed as 'anecdotal'. While there are undoubtedly count-

same nearby cafe and started to exchange stories.

They quickly realised that what they had been told was a one-off was, in fact, a systematic failure of the trust and the whole New Labour project for the NHS.

This was one reason why their evidence had to be rubbishised — with the woman who led the protests falling victim to a vicious hate campaign. The tragedy is that similar evidence against the NHS is *still* being rubbishised.

Let us end with one of those anecdotes the authorities dismiss — one left by a woman to comment on a story about Ann Clywd on the Wales Online website.

The woman describes the degrading treatment of her dying mother in one Welsh hospital.

When she complains, she says, 'ranks are closed so people don't take things further'.

The authorities know complaints fall on 'deaf ears and some like myself, because of their own ill health, do not have the stamina to follow things through. Money will be another obstacle to fight these cases, as they will inevitably carry on for years before a conclusion.'

It has happened to two friends. 'Three years down the line and they still do not have closure.'

She finishes with this heartfelt plea: 'Let me explain how I feel about Ann Clywd's findings. Myself and many, many friends who have experienced the disgusting downfalls of the Welsh NHS have all said we'd rather commit suicide than go into hospital when we are too old to stay at home through ill health.'

'I will... trust me. I will not be treated as a discarded piece of nuisance rubbish, as my mother was.'

Rather than another expensive, time-wasting re-organisation of the NHS, let the Government take one simple step.

Create a website, not particular to individual hospitals, but a general forum where people can post these heart-breaking stories.

How many hospitals will have the gall to dismiss case after case with their blanket approach of 'insufficient evidence'?

That way patients will know they are not alone. And a malign bureaucracy will no longer get away with dismissing stories of cruelty and death as 'merely anecdotal'.



Under fire: Ann (above and on her 1971 wedding day) has been attacked by the NHS and her own party

less dedicated and caring people working for the NHS who put themselves out for patients, like Ann Clywd, I, too, was flooded with letters from patients who'd suffered the same 'anecdotal' experiences of callousness and incompetence.

An old man described on the phone how he had watched his wife die of neglect. His call reduced me to tears. 'I don't know who to complain to. No one will listen,' he said by way of apology at the end of the conversation.

In a court of law, the testimony of a witness is given due weight. In the NHS, the same testimony is traduced as anecdote.

That is part of the problem. Every patient with a complaint is made to feel isolated — a one-off, who really shouldn't presume to denigrate such a noble institution.

Look at what happened to a Labour MP of long standing. What chance do the rest of us have?

One of the only reasons that the scandal of Mid Staffs came out was because a number of relatives of patients happened to go to the