

Police investigate abuse as autism care home is closed

Greg Hurst Social Affairs Editor

Police have launched an investigation after staff at a care home for adults with learning disabilities and autism were covertly filmed intimidating, mocking and restraining patients.

Some care workers at Whorlton Hall, a 17-bed specialist care home in County Durham, boasted that they had deliberately hurt patients and others were shown warning residents that they would be man-handled or treated in ways that they found distressing.

Sixteen people were suspended from the care home after the reporter who worked undercover for the BBC programme *Panorama* filmed the abuse and threats. The facility, operated by Cygnet Healthcare, has now been closed and all the patients relocated.

The private company, which provides mental health care, took over the hospital in January.

Cygnet Healthcare said in a statement that it was "shocked and saddened" by the allegations and said that all the patients have been transferred to other hospitals

It said: "We take these allegations extremely seriously. We have suspended

all the members of staff involved, simultaneously informed all relevant authorities, including the police, who have now instigated an inquiry and we are co-operating fully with their investigation."

Footage in last night's programme showed some staff using offensive language to refer to patients, with one worker describing Whorlton Hall as a "house of mongs" while another tells a patient that her family are "poison".

In one clip two male carers appear to intimidate a woman patient distressed by the proximity of male staff by saying that unless she keeps quiet they will "press the man button" and her room will become crowded with men.

One carer says that he will "deck" a patient and several members of staff describe incidents in which they banged one patient's head on the floor.

Eight years ago the *Panorama* programme uncovered abuse of patients at another private care home for vulnerable adults. A government inquiry led by Sir Stephen Bubb called for all such institutions to be shut down. Sir Stephen said last night: "How many abuse scandals does it take to get these institutions closed down?"

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