Letter to Virginia Bottomley 1

Here begins my saga of trying to complain about treatment in the NHS. Eventually I got absolutely nowhere but to start with I went straight to the top …

Saturday 28th December1991 from
Springfield Hospital 61 Glenburnie Road
London SW17 7DJ

Dear Mrs Bottomley,

Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Jamie Summers, age 37½, educated Eton College and Christ Church, Oxford (14 'O' levels, 3 A grade 'A' levels, 2 S levels). I believe we have a connection – my brother-in-law, Andrew Ingram is I think godfather to one of your children (very good choice).

Firstly, a brief summary of my personal predicament. Nearly three weeks ago I voluntarily admitted myself to the above establishment on the instigation of my wife, Sue, in order to ease the pressure on her mind caused by my somewhat restless and sleepless behaviour. Armed with a prescription from my G.P., Michael Gormley (who also looks after most of the Royal Family, not to mention the members of the group, Genesis), I presented myself at Bluebell ward under the auspices of my allocated NHS doctor, a man called Jonathan Hillum. Without my knowledge or consent, Michael's prescription dosage was immediately almost tripled and administered – this being that favourite toy of the psychiatric profession, namely Largactyl now called Chlorpromazine. Two days later, when this cosh was not having (in their eyes) a sufficiently stultifying effect on your's truly's brain a second doctor, one Dr. Vince, without even consulting Dr. Hillum, who was absent, decided to

give me 80 mg of Droperidol liquid – I would here like to point out that the maximum dose given by Desmond Kelly and his team at the lovely Priory in Roehampton Lane is 5 mg at any one time … I was pole-axed for 10 hours, stiff as a floorboard from the neck down. Anyway, blood had been taken (yet again) and glory be, when the analysis came back, I was told by a member of the night nursing staff that they were worried because my white blood cell count had increased dramatically and that I was to be given no drugs at all for two days (yippee !). This white blood cell problem is usually due to some infection but in my case had clearly been caused by massive over-prescription of these dangerous drugs, as I am not a sick person by nature and have never taken antibiotics in my life.

Two days off these substances gave me sufficient breathing space to recover my senses and to assert my rights in refusing to take them. Thus for the past 12 days or so I have simply taken 800 mg of Lithium Carbonate (Priadel) at night as I have done religiously for the past 19 months. I have been able to view the system dispassionately ever since.

Enough of my story. I hope, nay I am convinced that you are of as compassionate nature and will take it upon yourself to come and see some of the evils that are masquerading as care in the rotten apple that is psychiatric medicine in the National Health Service. Perhaps you and your boss, Mr Waldegrave and your underlings have been concentrating your energies on the normal hospitals, but your eyes and ears are needed here.

Let us start with the quality (sic) of the food. Perhaps Caroline Waldegrave could take an interest here – I hear she knows her onions ! When I arrived the cupboards were nigh bare – oh, the staff have their cosy little locked cupboards full of reasonable things but us patients/animals for our hungrier moments had little. For 10 days there was no sugar, no butter – only the lowest form of ‘spread’- then the cheapo powdered coffee and the tea-bags ran out and were not replenished. The

bread was the pappiest form of white trash available – any salad left over from ‘supper’ (at 6 p.m.) is generally thrown away vindictively by the staff. Fruit ? There might sometimes be 5 bananas or oranges between 28 of us.

As for the regular meals dished out from the kitchens ¼ mile away I would not deign to feed pigs or rats on the stuff. The mashed potatoes look tainted, the vegetables are boiled dry of nutrients, the meat if any is poor poor quality and our boiled eggs at breakfast are regularly done to a turn of 17 minutes – marvellous for everyone’s bowels ! Since I arrived I have done my utmost to upgrade this miserable diet with injections of fruit, butter, cheese, mayonnaise, marmite and loaves of my own bread – you see I am a wholesale baker by trade, We are what we eat after all.

Secondly, one must comment on the nursing. As in all things there is good and bad, but regretfully I have to report that predominantly the curtain falls on the distaff side. People crying in pain for help are left smirkingly to flounder on the floor, pleas for aid go unheard … ” no, I’m busy” is a favourite excuse. Vomit, shit and urine are left to be smeared around the ward. There is little love and care here. Petty rules abound; the kitchen, bathroom & washing/utility room are almost permanently locked and out of bounds to the ‘loonies’ – smoking is confined to a sauna (the radiator is jammed on) and the dining/play area, and yet the staff and doctors flaunt their own no smoking sign in their office, the hypocrites. Us patients do 90% of the nursing of our elderly co-sufferers – the incontinent ones often awash in their own urine and faeces slumped on their soiled and never-changed sheets. I am not over-painting my canvas.

As for the doctors here I shall name names. I can only speak about those I have met here on the ward and compare them with the doctors I met almost 12 years ago in the Priory and more recently briefly 19 months ago before the money ran out (it’s £400 per night now privately) and BUPA, bless their little

cotton socks, won't pay for my stays in these places. But I digress. The chief rottweiler in the pack of Wandsworth hounds is a man called Greville Gundy who has been in this game for many years (he featured in Jonathan Miller's recent madness series). Nearly retired now, he has been pushing drugs down people's throats with relish for ages – not long ago he gleefully told me that he has prescribed 2 grams per diem of Largactyl to some patients. Let us take this in context – Desmond Kelly probably wouldn't give anybody more than 300mg per day possibly half that – so we are talking 7 or 8 times the doses meted out under the private system. It is like taking 10 paracetamol or aspirin at a go – not good for the liver or the arteries as I am sure you will agree. Does he want the animals to become vegetables ?

Second in command are his lieutenants Hillum, Vince and Potter. Of these only Vince incurs my wrath, probably because of his spiteful treatment of yours truly not to mention others under his 'care'. If only the doses of these terrible body-shaking drugs, which I believe are desperately expensive anyway, were reduced to a palatable level or better still switched to more natural remedies available then the money saved could be reallocated to give more nursing staff, better wheelchairs etc.. Excuse my Bernard Levin length sentence !

One last gripe concerns the lamentable cleaning staff – a cursory wipe here and there simply ain't good enough – new brooms are needed.

Please let me know your views.

Yours faithfully and sincerely,

Jamie Summers

c.c. Bernard Levin