

Alison's Story

The Impact of Wilful Blindness



CORMETIS CONSULTING
Lived Experience and Courage

Alison's Story - The Impact of Wilful Blindness

My name is Tom Bell, I am a business consultant and former NHS Manager turned Whistleblower with lived experience and specific expertise in wilful blindness in Public Services. I am the author of Lions, Liars, Donkeys and Penguins - The Killing of Alison, the book tells the true story of the events leading to and following the suicide of my sister after a period of abuse in an NHS mental health hospital.

My family and I have a proud history of working in public service. My mum, my gran, and my aunty were all nurses, and including my five years in the NHS we have almost 100yrs of combined employment experience in health and care between us. And though this document paints an unflattering picture of what can happen when Public Services and the people in them fail, I remain a passionate advocate for effective and compassionate Public Services. For me, the NHS remains the most tangible and wonderful example of what collective responsibility looks like in practice. The concept of the NHS is humanity at its very best.

Every memorable journey begins somewhere, for our purposes this one begins in 1987. For those young enough to remember, Beverley Hills Cop 2 starring a very young looking Eddie Murphy, was the top grossing film of the year, Michael Jacksons Bad was the biggest selling album of the year, communism was teetering as the Iron Curtain began to twitch, Margaret Thatcher was re-elected for a third term, stock markets reeled as the Dow Jones Industrial Average lost nearly a quarter of its value in a single day that became known as Black Monday, and something called the world wide web was stirring, waiting patiently in the wings to burst forth onto the centre stage of history and change the world as we knew it. As someone in their mid-fifties who still has a copy of The Lost Boys on video, these events seem like a lifetime ago..

July/August 1987 – my sister Alison experienced psychosis and was sectioned to an NHS mental health hospital in Carlisle, Cumbria, called Garlands, she was 21. On her admission the clinical staff at the hospital noted how disturbed she was. Alison spent many months in the Garlands before being discharged in the autumn and becoming an outpatient of the hospital, still in its care but not as a resident.

Mid December 1987 – Alison's condition deteriorated, and she was readmitted to Garlands mental health hospital as an inpatient. She was discharged in late January 1988 and again became an outpatient in the hospital's care. Unknown to us, an older trainee mental health nurse had been taking a close and entirely inappropriate interest in Alison.

August 12th 1988 – Alison had an abortion at Carlisle City Hospital as a result of illegal sex acts committed by an NHS employee on the hospitals premises. Her crisis pregnancy and the acts of the trainee nurse were known about by staff at Garlands mental health hospital. The abortion was arranged by the consultant psychiatrist tasked with her care. Nobody was disciplined, the police were not informed, and the events were omitted from selected medical records. The offender and the consultant who helped conceal what happened remained in the employment of the NHS mental health hospital.. At this point, nobody outside the NHS was aware of what had gone on.

Late August 1988 – Alison left Cumbria to be with mum in Doncaster as a patient of NHS mental health services in South Yorkshire. Later that year she confided in mum, telling her what had happened when she was had been in Garlands at Carlisle. My mum didn't know what to do and the matter was not discussed again. Alison and mum were the only two people outside the NHS who knew what had gone on.

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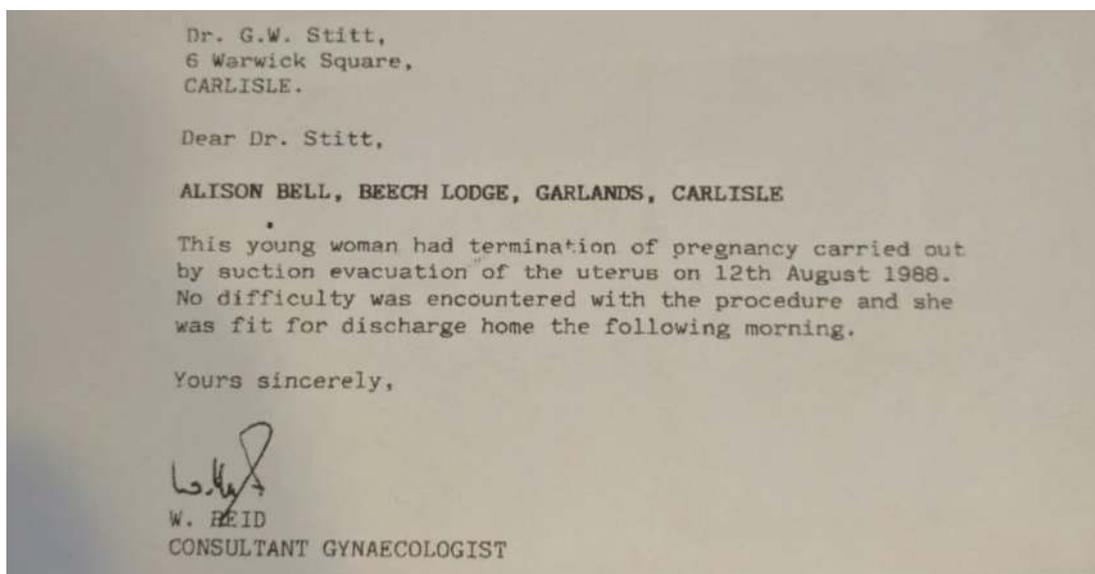
December 13th 1991 – Alison stepped in front a train at Rotherham Railway Station. The date coincided with what would have been the 3rd birthday of her aborted child. At this point in time, Alison was an inpatient of NHS mental health services in Doncaster. The Coroner, at the inquest held into her death was unaware, as were my older sister Sarah and I, of the events preceding Alison's suicide. In the absence of a suicide note, the Coroner records an open verdict into her death. Mum is now the only person outside the NHS who knows what has happened. We buried Alison on Christmas Eve; she was 25..

December 1999 – a chance conversation with my Mum led to my older sister Sarah and I becoming aware of what happened to Alison in 1988 for the first time. To say we were "surprised" would not cut it. For various reasons mum couldn't keep the knowledge of what had happened to herself any longer, and she told us what Alison had told her about her time in the care of the NHS in Cumbria.

January 2001 – after a year of persuading mum this was not a matter of personal shame, or one that could be swept under any carpet, we agreed our approach and on behalf of my family I coordinated contact with the NHS and police in Cumbria. I explained what we thought had occurred and asked them to work together to investigate the individual and the hospitals management. Both bodies assured me of their cooperation. Years later it emerged the NHS did not share the information they had with the police.

Feb 2001 - I requested copies of Alison's medical records and was told they would be made available shortly. Within days I was informed by the hospital they had been mistaken and that all Alison's medical records, two sets of separate documents held at two separate locations, had been destroyed. I was naturally perplexed and disappointed, but I ascribed the error to incompetence rather than deliberate collusion.

Summer 2001 – increasingly frustrated by the lack of progress, I started playing detective. I managed to locate copies of Alison's medical notes from a GP Practice in Doncaster. These supported what Alison had told mum, they showed she was in the care of the NHS in Cumbria at the time the abortion occurred. I sent copies of all these documents to the Chief Executive of the NHS hospital, Cumbria police and the Coroner. The Coroner thanked me for the information, saying what I had provided was significant.



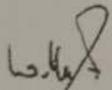
Dr. G.W. Stitt,
6 Warwick Square,
CARLISLE.

Dear Dr. Stitt,

ALISON BELL, BEECH LODGE, GARLANDS, CARLISLE

This young woman had termination of pregnancy carried out by suction evacuation of the uterus on 12th August 1988. No difficulty was encountered with the procedure and she was fit for discharge home the following morning.

Yours sincerely,


W. REID
CONSULTANT GYNAECOLOGIST

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February 2002 – Cumbria police informed us they had interviewed a suspect but that the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) had decided there was not enough evidence to take the case to court. We were disappointed and a just a touch confused, and I asked them to revisit the decision. The police directed me to the CPS who did not reply to my letters. At that point I was unaware that not only had Cumbria police never interviewed anyone, they had also "mislaidd" all the documents containing the medical notes I had unearthed and given to them. In 2016 it emerged that the real reason the Crown Prosecution Service had rejected the case was that the police had submitted an incomplete casefile without any supporting evidence.

February 2002 – the Chief Executive of North Cumbria NHS sent my family a strangely worded apology expressing his regret for the events that had occurred. It became clearer in later years that the phrasing he used was chosen very carefully. At this point we were unaware that he had not shared the crucial medical records we sent to him in Summer 2001, or existing personnel files relating to the individual in question with Cumbria police. These personnel files contained concerns about his behaviour toward patients.

Spring 2002 – faced with this dead end, my family and I licked our wounds and decided we had done what we could, we felt we needed to get back to our lives. Though we were bitterly disappointed we consoled ourselves by thinking that Cumbria police and North Cumbria NHS had done their very best to discover the truth, for us, and for Alison; why wouldn't they have? We were naivety incarnate.

December 13th 2011 – 20yrs to the day since Alison's death I was interviewed for what seemed like an incredible job working for the NHS in Cumbria. I soon found out the culture was not what it should be, or conducive to anyone with a strong internal compass. My propensity for putting the needs of patients first, made me unwelcome in the echo chambers of NHS leadership corridors. I was slowly, subtly, but surely, and relentlessly bullied. I was belittled, ostracized and finally reduced to tears in front of my colleagues in a public meeting space. Work became hostile and mentally unbearable, and after covering the workload of five people, I was driven to a breakdown.

Summer 2015 – after a month off work with stress and depression, I visited a private sector psychologist for help. The irony of meeting a man on the edge of despair who worked for an NHS Mental Health Trust was not wasted on her. I had become increasingly conflicted by the gap I could see between the stated values of the Trust I was working for and its behaviours. At that point, having witnessed first-hand how defensive and insular the culture of the NHS could be and having seen how wrongdoing was routinely covered-up, memories had begun stirring. I had seen behind the curtain, seen how the Trust managed situations to ensure it was never criticized, and I began to wonder if what happened to Alison had been a natural by-product of a broken culture rather than the one-off incident, we had all thought. I was questioning where I belonged. My therapist quickly got to the heart of the matter and suggested I should contact Cumbria police and ask them to revisit and reopen an investigation into the events leading to Alison's suicide. As soon as she told me what she felt I needed to do, it made perfect sense.

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August 2015 – I summoned up the courage to contact Cumbria police to ask if they would revisit the events of 1988 and reopen an investigation into Alison's case. I had to allay the fears of family and friends, I was clearly struggling with depression and trying to explain to people who loved and cared for me that reopening the hurts of the past was the key to moving forward, was not an easy sell. Cumbria police located the notes from the first investigation they had undertaken in 2001 and sent two senior officers to come to my home and talk to me about their findings. They tried to convince me that there was nothing to be gained from revisiting Alison's case. They assured me the original investigation had been of a good standard and had been conducted competently by reputable and reliable police officers. These turned out to be untruths for which they were eventually forced to apologize.

Cumbria police apologise for 'flawed investigation' into Alison Bell death

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Force have arrested ex-trainee male nurse as part of investigation into suicide of 25-year-old mental health patient



▲ Alison Bell was diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia in the 1980s. Photograph: Family handout

A “troubled” police force have apologised for conducting a flawed investigation after taking 15 years to make an arrest during an inquiry into the circumstances surrounding the suicide of a female mental health patient.

The Guardian has learned that Cumbria police have arrested a former trainee male nurse as part of their investigation, which has been running since 2002, into the death of Alison Bell, 25. The force are already under pressure over their mishandling of an investigation into the death of 13-month-old Poppi Worthington in 2012.

Bell was diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia in the 1980s. She was admitted to the Garlands clinic in Carlisle - now known as the Carleton clinic.

After an investigation, the Cumbria Mental Health and Learning Disabilities trust accepted that a relationship began with a member of staff and continued after she was discharged. She became pregnant, then had a termination and three years later killed herself in 1991.

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Summer 2016 – following a lengthy complaint process that culminated in a successful appeal, Cumbria police begrudgingly launched an internal review into the first investigation they had undertaken in 2001/02. On its completion, the findings of this review were so damning that Cumbria police refused to share it with us. The first investigation turned out to have been no more than a mirage; nobody was interviewed, nothing was followed-up, and the crucial records I gave them had been lost. At this point they realised they had no other option but to launch a fresh investigation into the events that preceded Alison's suicide.

Feb 2017 – almost 30yrs after committing his offences, the former NHS employee we suspected of wrongdoing was finally interviewed by Cumbria police in connection with the events of 1988. And when presented with copies of the original evidence we had first provided in 2001, he admitted his actions. He said he had sex with Alison when she was a patient on multiple occasions on the hospital premises. He went on to tell the police that Alison's psychiatrist, and numerous others, were aware of these events.

May 2017 – Cumbria police informed us that even though they were now in possession of the relevant supporting documents, copies of the medical records, and a full confession, the Crown Prosecution Service had again decided not to prosecute the individual in question. This time the CPS said it was because the case was not in the public interest. Naturally, we appealed the decision.

December 2017 – we were informed that our appeal to the CPS had failed. We were utterly devastated and arranged to meet them.

News
13th December 2017

Former nurse who had sex with patient at Carlisle's Garlands Hospital will not be charged

By Phil Coleman



   0 comment

A former psychiatric nurse who had sex with a patient will not be charged after prosecutors said it would not be in the public interest.

Alison Bell, the psychiatric outpatient involved, became pregnant but later had a termination. She took her own life in 1991.

Miss Bell's brother Tom has been battling for decades to have the former nurse put before a court because he feels the relationship was inappropriate.

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May 2018 – we finally met the senior prosecutors from the Crown Prosecution Service, it was the first time we had come face-to-face with them. We asked them to explain what seemed to us to be an inexplicable decision not to prosecute a man who committed sexual offences on a vulnerable mentally ill young woman in the care of the hospital he was working in. They were unmoved, I think they had made their decision and felt unable to back down from it. I ended the meeting by asking if they would let us pursue a private prosecution, they told us they would block any attempts to do this. I have no idea why.

Spring 2019 – we discovered INQUEST, a national charity who provide support for the bereaved in relation to deaths that occur in the care of the state. They agreed to help us with a crowd-funding campaign to raise the funds we needed to pay the legal fees associated with obtaining a fresh inquest into Alison's death. And thanks to the generosity of many people, the £8,000 we required was raised.

May 05th 2020 - on what would have been Alison's 54th birthday, I self-published a book, Lions, Liars, Donkeys and Penguins - The Killing of Alison. In many respects I did it to help me try and make sense of everything that has happened and highlight what I think are important issues. Putting my thoughts down on paper turned out to be the best therapy I have ever had.

As I write this, it is now Autumn 2021 – our crowdfunded appeal to quash the original inquest of 1992 and secure a new one is still underway and the case our solicitor and barrister have constructed is now with the Attorney General's Office. As Joe Strummer might say, the future remains unwritten...

Fight for fresh inquest into 'suicide' of mental health patient in Rotherham who had abortion following sex with nurse

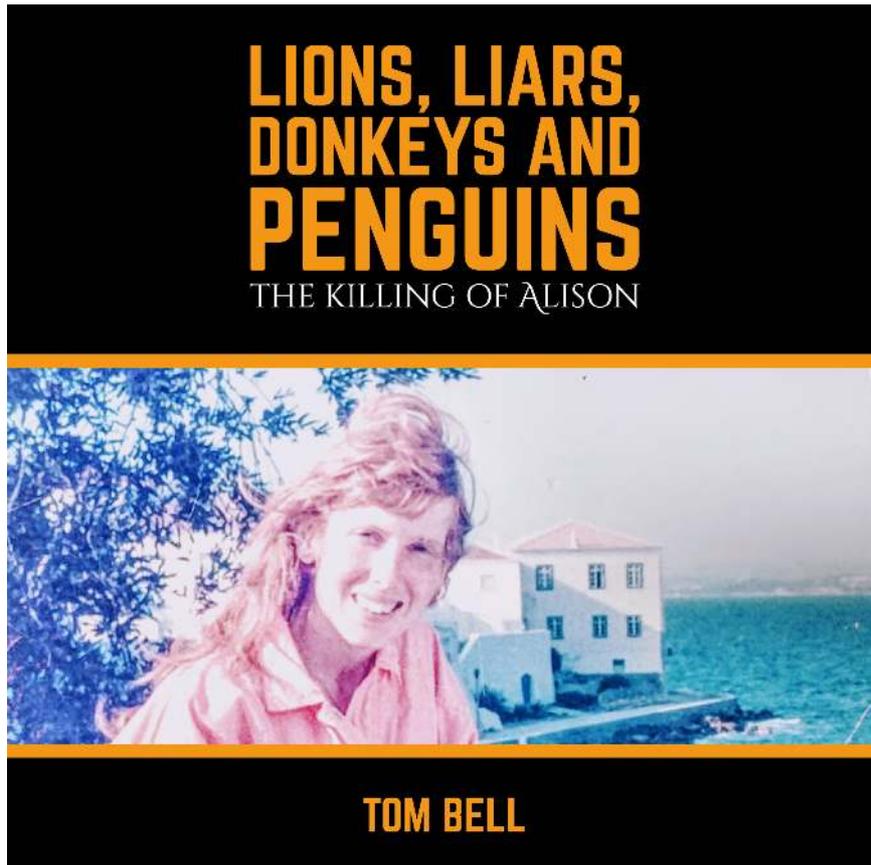
CALENDAR | 🕒 Friday 26 July 2019, 3:41pm



• Sam Casey reports

The family of a woman who was hit by a train in Rotherham 28 years ago are campaigning for a fresh inquest into her death – after they discovered she had an abortion following a sexual relationship with a member of staff in a psychiatric hospital.

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"This tragic tale is representative of the general failure of our institutions to act morally, whose leaders worry more about their reputation than their organisation's purpose. Insightful, compelling and disturbing."

John Seddon - Managing Director Vanguard

For more information about what happened to Alison including copies of the documents referred to in this timeline visit www.AlisonsStory.com