

My Story - Steve Turner, Campaigner for safer healthcare

Steve Turner is a man on a mission – to create a better climate within our National Health Service where people can speak out about unsafe practices without fear of losing their jobs.

He's a rare breed of health professional whose career spans hands-on nursing, training and innovation as well as campaigning for greater transparency within the NHS.

Steve began his career as a nurse specialising in mental health inspired by, and slightly scared of what happened to his grandfather who had suffered major depression all his life.

His appetite for learning took him through a degree in Social Policy and then into the world of healthcare IT. Steve spent the next decade working on clinical systems for American giant Shared Medical Systems, progressing from project manager to Senior Strategic Services Consultant of the US arm of the company, working with leaders of clinical teams in the UK

Steve then returned to the NHS, successfully revamping the Information and Technology department at Tunbridge Wells prior to a trust merger.

A spell in consultancy for the Kent and Medway Cancer network followed, with Steve leading two multi-organisational projects to identify the most effective information and prescribing systems. These brought clinical teams together to manage a complicated buying system in a much more efficient and cost effective way.

Then came a career crossroads. Steve and his partner decided it was time for a lifestyle change. They had enjoyed many holidays in Cornwall and decided this was the place to be. Plus Steve wanted to return his first love of hands-on nursing. He did a Return to Practice Nursing course and began work as a community mental health nurse in St Austell. Then he moved to an assertive outreach team based in Truro and dealing with some of the most vulnerable people in the community. This involved long term relationships and building trust with patients, something Steve much enjoyed. He also became a Nurse Prescriber, specialising in drugs within the mental health framework.

However in 2008, with proposed cutbacks on the horizon, Steve gently told his patients about the changes and that he might not necessarily be their regular nurse in the future, a step he thought was an important part of good care planning.

Following the standard procedures, he raised his concerns with the Cornwall Partnership NHS Foundation Trust. His only mistake was to copy his grievance letter to three GPs with whom he'd been working closely.

An attempt was made to discipline him but he accepted that what he had done was outside the policy of the Trust.

However the matter didn't end there. The cuts had particularly upset two of Steve's patients who realised that their continuity of care was being threatened and so they filed formal comments about the changes. But once these forms reached the desks of senior management, Steve was accused of bringing the organization into disrepute and suspended from work. Realising that the Trust would be pressing on with the cutbacks, and that his hopes of eventually winning a senior clinical job were scuppered, he resigned.

Steve returned to his training skills, developing medicines management training for staff at the Trust and worked on some major projects involving clinical governance and prescribing for patients with substance issues.

However by 2013 he was becoming increasingly concerned at the plight of the mental health staff he was training. They were becoming tearful in training sessions and were clearly stressed. They told Steve they were afraid to speak out for fear of victimisation as there was no alternative employer within travelling distance.

Steve attempted to discuss his concerns with the Trust but he quickly hit a brick wall. The Care Quality Commission were more sympathetic and arranged for an external person to review his complaint. However he was shocked to be left out of the loop, and merely told there had been 'recommendations.'

This process cemented Steve's ambition to campaign for better transparency in the NHS. He decided to set up Care Right Now as a structured company with an ethical base, delivering change management consultancy within health care, and a new breed of patient led education for clinical staff.

He has also created a movement to bring together people who raise concerns about patient safety and share their experiences, with Turn Up the Volume! on Patient Safety, a new initiative run on a charity basis. With a highly successful inaugural conference in Bristol under its belt, the movement is swiftly gathering momentum.

Does he have any regrets about what he did?

None at all, Steve says he would do it all over again. But he admits it took its toll on his personal life, taking him to the verge of bankruptcy, affecting his home life and linked to episodes of major depression.

It takes more than just courage to report concerns about patient safety, as Steve Turner discovered firsthand. Now he wants to make that path smoother for others in the future.

When NHS staff can report concerns without fear, he says, we will have achieved what we have set out to do. Ultimately this about patients' lives – and staff's livelihoods.

