

Nurse left in tears by 'horrendous' staff who turned Sally Mays away from mental health unit

Tragic Sally, 22, killed herself just hours after being turned away on July 25, 2014

By James Campbell Reporter 05:00, 28 SEP 2022 Updated 13:29, 28 SEP 2022



Sally Mays killed herself after she was turned away by Humber NHS Foundation Trust's crisis team. Sally as a teenager (Image: Angela Mays)

A nurse says she was left in tears after watching tragic Sally Mays turned away from a mental health unit by 'horrendous' staff.

Mental health nurse Laura Elliot was present on the day Sally was assessed by the crisis team on July 25, 2014 at Miranda House in Hull. Sally was turned away and just hours later killed herself.

Ms Elliot had referred Sally to the crisis team although she was not involved in the decision to turn Sally away. She told an inquest in Hull how she was "upset and angry" by the way Sally had been treated by the crisis team.

As she left for the day a short time later in tears, she bumped into consultant psychiatrist Dr Opoku-Fofie where she explained why she was so upset. But the failure of either one of them to disclose the meeting led to the inquest into Sally's death being quashed by the High Court and another to be carried out which is taking place this week in Hull.

Both Ms Elliot and Dr Opoku-Fofie say they never mentioned it to bosses because it was an informal chat. They felt raising it would have made the meeting seem more significant than it actually was.

Sally, 22, who had mental health issues, died at home in Hull on July 25, 2014 shortly after she was refused a bed at Miranda House. Her parents Angela and Andy have fought for the last eight years for improvements to be made and lessons to be learnt from Sally's death.

Sally took her own life after two nurses from Humber NHS Foundation Trust's crisis team – Paddy McKee and Gemma Pearson - refused to admit her to hospital following a 14-minute assessment despite being a suicide risk.

An eight-day inquest in 2015 heard Sally, who had emotionally unstable personality disorder, died from an overdose and mechanical asphyxia after Yorkshire Ambulance Service took 99 minutes to reach her west Hull flat – they should have been there within 30 minutes.



**Sally Mays took her own life after she was turned away by Humber NHS Foundation Trust's crisis team.
(Image: Angela Mays)**

Bridget Dolan KC had argued at the High Court in December 2021 that the conversation between Dr Opoku-Fofie and Ms Elliot on the day she died was "knowingly withheld" from the original inquest in October 2015. She said the discussion revealed "a clear opportunity" to reverse the decision not to admit Sally.

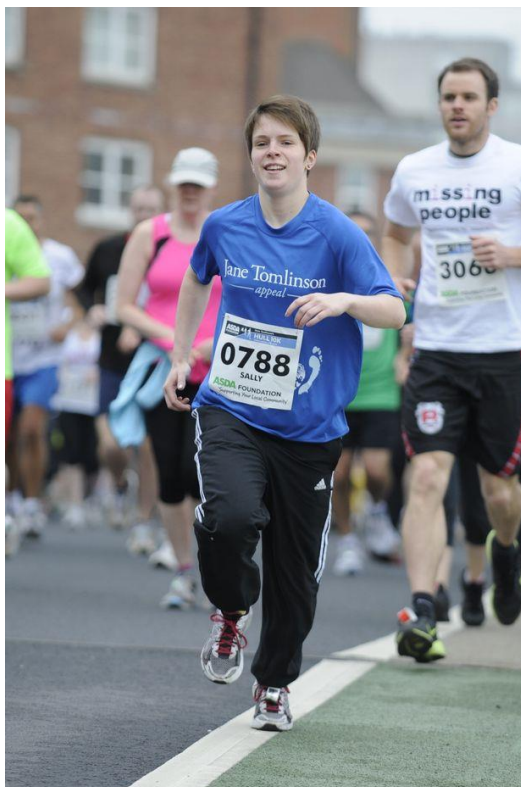
However, both Ms Elliot and Dr Opoku-Fofie deny there was any deliberate aim to withhold any information. They say they felt there was no clinical value in the conversation which merited disclosing the meeting to senior management or other during a number of investigations. The meeting only came to light much later during a Nursing and Midwifery Council investigation in 2019.

On Tuesday, Ms Elliot told the inquest how the assessment that day had left her very distressed saying: "I was very upset by what happened with Sally that day. It was very emotive. I felt frustrated, angry and upset and it made me cry.

"I was trying to advocate how I was feeling to the crisis team as they dealt with Sally but the staff criticised my opinions and told me I didn't know what I was talking about. I was very upset by how they were treating Sally.

"I was angry with the crisis team and how horrendous they were. It was a horrible experience. I was concerned what happened would damage my relationship with Sally which I'd carefully built up.

"I spoke to a colleague on the phone later who reassured me I had done all I could. I planned to submit a complaint and felt the situation would be escalated."



Sally Mays killed herself after she was turned away by Humber NHS Foundation Trust's crisis team. Sally during a 10k run (Image: Angela Mays)

Ms Elliot then provided more details about her conversation with Dr Opoku-Fofie in the car park although she admitted she could not remember much now. She said she never documented it and never raised the conversation during the inquest in 2015 and only raised it during the NMC investigation.

She said: “Dr Opoku-Fofie had never seen me this upset before and he said something like ‘gosh, are you alright’. I was still angry and upset when I saw him.

“I cannot remember telling him exactly what happened and the conversation lasted around five minutes. I did not expect him to do anything on the back of our conversation. I spoke to Dr Opoku-Fofie informally about my feelings. There was nothing sinister in not mentioning the conversation.

“The meeting was not clinical but was about my feelings so I felt it was inappropriate to raise it officially. I didn’t feel it was that important at the time. I would never deliberately withhold information relating to the death of a patient at an inquest.

“I spoke to Dr Opoku-Fofie, not as a clinical psychiatrist, but as a supportive colleague. I spoke about my feelings and I didn’t expect anything to be escalated as a result of our conversation.”

Dr Opoku-Fofie also gave evidence at the inquest on Tuesday. He was a consultant psychiatrist within the inpatient service but also oversaw the crisis team. He confirmed it was a relatively brief conversation with no clinical discussion about Sally’s care.

He said: “I saw Laura and went up just to say ‘hi’. She seemed emotional and I clearly had the sense she was upset. She told me how she had taken Sally to the crisis team and explained how she was refused admission.

“She also mentioned the treatment from one of the crisis team nurses who had not been nice to her. Laura did not give any details of the assessment carried out on Sally and she did not specify anything around the clinical outcome.

“I told Laura not to worry saying Sally was likely to present herself to the crisis team again over the weekend.”



Sally Mays killed herself after she was turned away by Humber NHS Foundation Trust's crisis team. Sally dressed for her prom (Image: Angela Mays)

Dr Opoku-Fofie was also asked about why he did not bring up the conversation during the various investigations into Sally's death and prior to the inquest.

He said: "I didn't feel the conversation should have been raised at the time. Laura had the first-hand account and felt she was better placed to bring it up. For me this was a conversation in which a friend wanted to offload and I did not want to raise it and make it out to be something it wasn't.

"Having reflected on this, if I had mentioned the conversation earlier we would not be here today. Although it was informal, I should have brought it up at the right time."

He was also asked by Ms Dolan, representing the Mays family, about whether this meeting represented another missed opportunity to help Sally and that he could have stepped in and readmitted her. But, he said he was not privy to all the facts and therefore was not in a position to make such a decision.

Following Sally's death, a police investigation into possible corporate manslaughter and other offences was launched but resulted in no charges.



Disgraced mental health nurse Paddy McKee

However, McKee was struck off by the Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC) earlier this year following a Fitness to Practice hearing. McKee was employed in the crisis service of the Humber NHS Foundation Trust at the time he dealt with Sally.

After a 12-day hearing, all 30 charges against McKee were proved along with six aggravating factors while all mitigation was dismissed. The report by the NMC condemned the actions of McKee stating "he treated her in a way that lacked basic kindness and compassion". The NMC found his actions to refuse Sally admission contributed to her death.

The inquest in Hull in 2015 heard Sally asked to be admitted to hospital as her mental health deteriorated in the last few days of her life. Three nurses from her community team and her psychotherapist recommended a short stay in hospital in line with her care plan.

However, nurses McKee and Pearson refused to admit her after carrying out what Professor Paul Marks described as a "lamentable" assessment. Instead, they called police when Sally started banging her head off a wall and tried to strangle herself in her distress.

However, police officers knew Sally needed to be in hospital to keep her safe and had a "stand-up fight" with the two nurses outside Miranda House to persuade them to change their minds. But they were forced to take Sally home when the nurses refused to reconsider.

Prof Paul Marks said the decision not to admit Ms Mays constituted "neglect" which bore "a direct causal relationship to her death later that evening". He said that she had been admitted following an initial assessment she "would have survived and not died when she did".

A further missed opportunity to save her life came from the 69-minute delay to an ambulance arriving at Sally's flat after her 999 call was not categorised appropriately, the coroner said. Following the inquest in 2015, coroner Prof Marks ruled the failure to admit Sally to hospital was neglect and said: "For the avoidance of doubt, had Sally been admitted, she would not have died that day." The inquest continues.