WE FEEL SAFE – Health case study

Case Study – Krzysztof from Poland (name changed)

Case Study: Barriers to Accessing NHS Healthcare

Background

Krzysztof (name changed) is a Polish national who has received holistic support from our organisation for over three years, including support through a previous project. He is a survivor of modern slavery and has required support with a range of issues affecting his wellbeing and stability. More recently, we supported him with an application for social housing.

Health Problem

Krzysztof has experienced ongoing problems with his shoulder following a dislocation that occurred approximately 16 years ago, shortly after he came to the UK. The condition has continued to affect him and, more recently, he experienced significant pain while waiting for surgery.

Krzysztof had been waiting for surgery for more than 18 months. During this period, accessing information about his treatment and waiting time was difficult.

Difficulties Accessing NHS Services

One of the main difficulties was communicating with the doctor's secretary to find out when the surgery would take place and how long Krzysztof was expected to wait. As he was experiencing pain, obtaining information about his treatment was particularly important.

We attempted to contact the relevant service several times, but calls frequently went directly to voicemail. We also found it difficult to make contact with the hospital in Sunderland to obtain information about the planned treatment.

After waiting for more than a year and a half, Krzysztof was eventually contacted by the hospital and given a date for his surgery. He attended the required pre-assessment appointment and was given a surgery date approximately one to two weeks later.

However, only two to three days before the planned surgery, Krzysztof was contacted and informed that the operation had been cancelled because the hospital needed to deal with an emergency.

Impact of the Cancellation

The cancellation was particularly difficult for Krzysztof because he had already been waiting for more than 18 months and was experiencing pain. When he received the news, he became extremely frustrated and angry. During the conversation, he spoke inappropriately to a member of hospital staff.

Following this incident, Krzysztof was removed from the waiting list. He was subsequently transferred to a different specialist and had to begin the process again with a new waiting list in another town, South Shields.

This meant that, despite having already waited more than 18 months and completing the pre-assessment process, Krzysztof was once again left without a confirmed date for treatment.

Current Situation

Krzysztof is now experiencing renewed uncertainty about when he will receive treatment. He does not currently have a confirmed surgery date and has again approached our service for support.

We are supporting him to try to establish contact with the new specialist and obtain information about the proposed date for his treatment. This demonstrates the ongoing role that our service plays in helping vulnerable clients navigate healthcare services and advocate for themselves when communication with services is difficult.

For someone who has experienced significant vulnerability, including modern slavery and housing insecurity, consistent communication and support to navigate complex systems can be particularly important.

What Could Improve the Client's Experience?

Several changes could help people in similar circumstances:

- **Shorter waiting times:** Reducing waiting times for planned surgery could prevent patients from living with prolonged pain and uncertainty.
- **Clearer and more timely communication:** Patients should receive timely information about waiting times, appointments, cancellations and changes to their treatment.
- **Better access to administrative staff:** Sufficient staffing to respond to patient enquiries could make it easier for patients and support workers to obtain information.
- **Support following cancellations:** Where planned treatment is cancelled, patients could benefit from clear information about the next steps and an indication of when treatment is likely to be rescheduled.

- **Consideration of individual circumstances:** Vulnerable patients may require additional support to navigate changes to specialists, waiting lists and treatment locations.
- **Adequate staffing and capacity:** Greater capacity to manage emergency surgery alongside planned procedures may help reduce disruption to scheduled operations where possible.

Role of Holistic Support

This case demonstrates the importance of holistic support for people who face multiple barriers at the same time. Our involvement has extended beyond the client's immediate health concerns and has included helping him navigate NHS services, communicate with healthcare providers and access social housing support.

In this situation, our continued involvement has been particularly important because Krzysztof is once again facing uncertainty and is finding it difficult to establish contact with his new specialist independently.

Conclusion

Krzysztof's experience illustrates the challenges that can arise when a person with an existing health problem encounters long waiting times, difficulties communicating with healthcare services and the cancellation of planned treatment.

It also demonstrates how these difficulties can have a cumulative effect. After waiting for more than 18 months, completing pre-assessment and receiving a surgery date, Krzysztof's operation was cancelled shortly before it was due to take place. Following an angry interaction with a member of staff, he was removed from the waiting list and transferred to another specialist in South Shields, resulting in another period of uncertainty.

The case highlights the importance of effective communication, appropriate support for vulnerable patients, shorter waiting times and clear processes following cancelled procedures. It also demonstrates the value of holistic support in helping individuals navigate complex healthcare systems and maintain access to essential services.