

## **Blaenau Gwent Leg Club**

### **Fight the good fight**

Our story begins in February 2007 when, at the Blaenau Gwent Leg Club, we started to hear whispers from different sources that the Blaenau Gwent Local Health Board (BGLHB) had decided to take away the nurses from the Leg Club.

This rumour refused to go away. Christine, our lead nurse, eventually called a meeting with the Club's committee members and told us that the BGLHB was going to decommission the leg service on 30 April 2007. The committee felt that this was unacceptable as so much work had gone into getting this vital service started. Therefore, my fellow committee members and I decided to fight the decision. So the battle commenced. As secretary of the club, I became fully involved in the campaign. Christine's position as an employee of Gwent Healthcare Trust prevented her from being involved.

The first thing we did was to meet with Trish Law AM, our Welsh Assembly member, and Dai Davies MP, our member of parliament. Carole (Committee member) and I duly arrived at the constituency office in Ebbw Vale and told our tale. Both Trish and Dai were horrified at the prospect of the Club closing as a result of BGLHB's actions. Trish's late husband, Peter Law MP AM, had supported us at the very inception of the Leg Club, when he had officially opened the doors to Raglan Terrace where the Club is held. He was also our referee for our application for a lottery grant (we received £5000) but sadly died of a brain tumour before he could witness the success of the Club.

We visited the local newspaper *The Gwent Gazette* and the photographer came and took pictures. The story was published the following week.

Trish telephoned the BGLHB to arrange a meeting; however, the date they gave us was 30<sup>th</sup> April, the day of the proposed decommissioning. This did not go down well and Trish made her feelings quite clear - she did not believe that in the two months we had left they could not spare half an hour for a meeting. A meeting was arranged for the following Monday at Anvil Court, the home of the BGLHB.

Monday came and we all trooped into the conference room; the opposition sat at the opposite side of the table and you could cut the atmosphere with a knife.

The Chair of the Board started the meeting by saying that they were not decommissioning the leg service but reorganising it; they would not commission nurses to work at the Club in a non-clinical setting. They said this was because of new regulations that were coming into force in April. All the patients (or 'members' as they like to be called) would have to be treated by their GPs or at home, whichever the district nursing team deemed most appropriate. We stated that this would not be acceptable to members. However, the Board did not want to listen. So, after a few heated words, the meeting ended and I think they thought that that would be the end of the matter. But my back was up and I was in a fighting mood.

I pondered my next move. First, I wrote letters to all the county borough councillors - 49 in total. The Mayor of Borough was contacted and he agreed to support us. Next, letters were sent to all the local town councillors, and the GP surgeries to inform them about the increased workload they would have to endure if the Club was closed. Whilst doing this I was in constant contact with Ellie Lindsay who gave me wonderful support and advice.

Ellie then supplied me with contacts in Parliament and the Royal College of Nursing advised me to contact the *Daily Mail* and the Jeremy Vine show on Radio 2. Letters were sent; some were answered and some were not. To date, the papers and radio have still not replied but, as Ellie pointed out, lower limb problems are not front page news. However, we kept on sending the letters. Some of the MPs referred me to the Welsh Assembly and my constituency member Dai Davies MP; others noted our concerns but were unable to help as we were not in their constituencies.

The *South Wales Argus* newspaper was then contacted. They thought it would be a good story as the Assembly elections are due in May. They wanted us to keep in contact. However, the ultimate outcome was a success so there was no story.

At this time I began to reach a low point as nothing seemed to be happening and I wasn't getting anywhere.

Another meeting was arranged with Trish to keep her informed of the progress and I gave her copies of all my paperwork. Her next move was to raise the question of the Leg Club's closure at the Assembly. The Health Minister said he would make enquiries and give her an answer. As the question of new regulations had been raised by the BGLHB, Trish's secretary carried out a search of the Assembly library archives for any regulations that had been introduced or any that were going to be introduced. None were found.

An hour after the question had been raised I was telephoned at home. It was the Chief Executive of the BGLHB wanting to know if a liaison officer could come to the Club the next day to liaise between us and the Board. It was obviously a strategy to find out about the Club. It is strange that even though the Club had been in existence for 18 months, nobody from the relevant departments had visited it, but after that question had been raised, visits were arranged and my phone did not stop ringing for the next week.

The Board wanted to know what we wanted to achieve from another meeting. It was even suggested that as we were now established we may be prepared to go it alone as a voluntary organisation, possibly holding the Club at the new hospital that is due to be built in Ebbw Vale or at Blaina Hospital. We politely rejected that idea as we wanted to remain as an independent Club under the auspices of the Lindsay Leg Club Foundation. Despite being subjected every day to different suggestions I stuck to my ground.

During this time Ellie was kept apprised of the ongoing situation and the Foundation's trustees were also kept up to date. They were all doing their part in the fight, lobbying all their contacts, raising support and passing on advice for which I am so very grateful.

Then the day came when I received a telephone call from the Modernisation and Nursing Director, who said there were concerns about infection control and would we agree to an infection control audit. I said we had nothing to hide.

It was surprising how fast things were happening. The day of the audit arrived. Our nurses, Jan and Karen, were very upset about the whole situation. They had loyalties to both sides but patients' welfare always comes first. I told them not to worry as we have up-to-date infection control procedures in place and that they are good at their jobs and so should carry on as normal. Members were treated as the health board visitors watched and inspected everything. They went away and said that we would have the results at the next meeting, which was at the end of the week.

Finally the day of reckoning arrived, and Carole, Trish and myself arrived at the meeting. The atmosphere was totally different from the previous time. We were offered tea and coffee, greeted with smiles, and the chief executive even changed my chair for one that was easier for me to sit in (don't fall for it Paul I thought - play it by ear).

The first item on the agenda was to discuss the members' and district nurses' concerns. Two people were introduced to us - the director of Nursing for Gwent Healthcare Trust and the Borough Manager from the same trust. The infection control audit was raised and they were extremely complimentary, which did not surprise us as we have every confidence in our system.

The two main health and safety points that were raised related to pedal-operated bins for contaminated dressings and using face masks when emptying the dirty water. This could be rectified immediately and they said they would supply the necessary items as the issue concerned the health and safety of their staff. So far, so good.

Two other points raised related to wash hand basins at the point of treatment, and a sink not being available for washing buckets in case of spillage and no sluice hopper sink into which to empty buckets.

The first two points I accepted as not being a problem. I addressed the other points by quoting from information supplied by a Clinical Nurse Specialist (infection Control) that Ellie had sent to me. I read this out to them and their faces were a picture. They accepted that there was nothing I could do about those things as we are in rented premises. We therefore agreed that it was just a small hurdle to surmount.

The result was that they agreed to continue the service as long as they could come in to check that all protocols were being followed. There also wanted regular audits on performance and infection control, which is something that happens anyway.

The Health Board and the Healthcare Trust will now back us in promoting the service and developing it into something that can only be regarded as a benefit to all members of the community

We have even been offered visits from professionals to advise on diabetes, heart conditions, exercise, healthy living, and welfare rights. In addition, if there is any thing

that members would like to learn more about the Board are prepared to see if a course can be set up with the help of GAVO (Gwent Association of Voluntary Organisations).

This whole process could have been prevented if someone had taken the trouble to visit the Club, assess the situation and find out what the Leg Club Foundation is all about.

I also think that they did not expect us to react in the way that we did. They thought the decision had been made and we would sit back and accept it.

My advice to anyone in a similar situation is to fight and keep on fighting. Do not give in. Drop hints now and again about any important people that you have contacted. It is surprising how that little bit of information can cause people to panic, especially if, like in Wales, elections are approaching.

Anyway, let us hope that the Board are as good as their word or I'll have to start all over again. There will be very bad publicity if they rescind on the agreement now.

Paul Jenkins  
Secretary Blaenau Gwent Leg Club, 2007