

# Never give up

**The fight to save Bridlington Hospital is over – or is it? Our brave members will never give up**

The chill North Sea wind that can blow across the Yorkshire coastal town of Bridlington may well be needed this winter to keep down the temperatures of residents and Unite members after health secretary Alan Johnson allowed the closure of two acute wards and the cardiac monitoring unit at the town's hospital. This follows the loss of the maternity unit earlier last year, with all the services being transferred to Scarborough Hospital.

Seriously ill patients from Bridlington are now faced with a 22 mile journey by ambulance along the A165 that can either be congested with holiday traffic in summer or closed from snow and high winds in winter.

Hardly surprising then that Unite's health national officer, **Karen Reay** has said this is "a disaster for the citizens of Bridlington who deserve much better" or that Unite regional officer **Terry Cunliffe** has commented, "Unite members are demoralised and angry about the transfer of acute services to the Scarborough Hospital site. They feel that their contribution to the provision of first class clinical care to the people of Bridlington has been undervalued and ignored."

The decision could have political implications for Labour after the town's Conservative MP Greg Knight obtained a commitment from shadow health secretary Andrew Lansley that providing the basic facilities remain intact at Bridlington he will look to transfer them back from Scarborough if the Tories replace Labour at the next election.

When it was built at the end of the 1980s the 220-bed hospital represented the biggest step forward ever taken in the provision of health care in the seaside resort.

Services once located on scattered sites and outdated buildings were brought under one wing on a green-field site that had additional space to expand. Since then local residents have themselves raised thousands to fund equipment – including that for the now re-located six-bed cardiac monitoring unit.

The hospital held in high regard by local people and staffed by enthusiastic professionals, has sadly now gone. A ward for elderly patients with mental health needs has

moved out. A modern, clean 28-bedded ward is now a glorified store cupboard.

According to **Franco Villani**, Unite senior rep at Bridlington the moves have meant that "morale has never been lower."

Unite members have worked tirelessly to prevent the run-down of the hospital. Franco with fellow reps **Michelle George** and **Steve Holliday** have courageously stepped out where others have feared to tread.

Although these latest moves have left them needing a bit of time to recover, they intend to "continue the fight to preserve the services we still have and also seek to have the essential locally sited facilities Bridlington residents need returned back here," says Franco.

Mick Pilling, 'Save Bridlington Hospital Action Group' chair, is also not throwing in the towel saying, "patients need to be taken to the nearest hospital when suffering a heart attack or chest pains. We know, sadly, that patients will die. When that happens we will continue to remind those who've taken these decisions of the effects."

## Action

The action group together with Unite members have in the past few years organised the largest demonstrations ever seen in Bridlington, a place more known for its retirement homes than its radicalism.

Last July over 6,000 people, in a town of less than 40,000 were mobilised to protest, taking part in a triumph of agitation and organisation.

"They turned out because they were angry," says Franco. "But it was also because we were active. At work and in the community we fight for what our members want, the union reps work damn hard. In return members have turned out in good numbers to events we've co-organised. I feel the members do appreciate the work we, and the Unite officers have put in. We are going to need their continued support."

Michelle George says she is, "extremely proud of what we achieved, the services would no doubt have been cut several years ago if it wasn't for the union's efforts. The two rallies

were very well supported and it was an amazing and emotional experience to take part."

As services at the hospital move out, the body behind the changes – Scarborough and North East Yorkshire healthcare NHS Trust – are moving new ones into some of the wards that currently stand eerily empty or "spooky" as **Sally Hardcastle** says, a catering assistant at the hospital who fears for the long term future of it.

But this good news is tempered by the fact that the new renal dialysis unit is being run by the private company Fresenius Medical Care.

Similarly the new health centre due to come into operation from April next year is the product of a national NHS review by Lord Darzi. As such it is to be operated by a private company, possibly even Virgin. All the town's GPs have opposed these moves.

Unite's **Steve Holliday** believes the future will, "see more privatisation. I'm angry that former chief executives and others on the Trust board have made these decisions and then just walked away." Since 1999 the Trust has had four CEOs and is currently advertising for a fifth.

Last year the then incumbent Ian McInnes reacted to its debt of over £20m by threatening to sack 600 workers, and close three wards across the two hospitals causing Alan Johnson to step in and "park up the historic debt" reports Franco.

If the Trust had hoped to save money by its' latest moves at Bridlington then according to Franco this seems unlikely. He says, "It has been reported that the new shuttle bus service to take people to Scarborough has cost £600,000 in the first three months. It's also estimated to have cost an additional £650,000 to introduce changes within the ambulance service and the paramedics are telling me that they're still not fully ready.

"The improvements that will be needed at Scarborough, which is a much older hospital, are not yet costed but I have little doubt will be millions. What they've done makes no economic sense and the results will be a poorer service all round."

# Too few to beat

## Health visitors can help new mums beat depression. But are there too few to go round?

It should be one of the happiest times of a woman's life. But for many mums, the excitement felt at the arrival of their new baby is often quickly replaced by feelings of anxiety and depression, and in some cases, despair and hopelessness.

Around 15 per cent of mothers suffer from postnatal depression (PND) – that's thousands of women in the UK suffering often distressing symptoms at any one time.

For many new mums, especially those with PND, their health visitor plays an enormously important role, and in many cases acts as a lifeline.

"The role of a health visitor in supporting mums with PND is considerable," says Unite's **Cheryll Adams**, from the union's community practitioners' and health visitors' association (CPHVA).

"For women with mild-to-moderate PND, health visitors can offer active listening and cognitive behavioural therapy. Of course, mums can go to their GP where they may be offered antidepressants, or they may be put on a waiting list for counselling. But often this means waiting for a month, which is a heck of a long time for a woman with PND to wait. This is where health visitors can step in."

Chloe\*, who gave birth to twins in July 2007, suffered from PND and believes that if it hadn't been for the support of her health visitor, there was a real risk she may have ended up killing herself.

"During my pregnancy I suffered depression, my father passed away and my husband had an affair. After the birth he left us when the girls were three months old. I also have a five year old boy who had just started school and I run a very busy business from home. I also have no family to call on for support."

"When my husband left, I called the local mental health team out of hours who in turn called my health visiting team. The health visitor who came saw what a desperate state I was in. I had postnatal depression, had lost lots of weight, could not stop crying and was considering killing myself and my children.

"She was absolutely the lifeline that I needed. She came regularly, frequently at first and then less often. She was an absolute godsend – she made practical suggestions and offered emotional support. She saw me through the darkest days and was always at the end of the phone."

Sarah\* also suffered from PND, and she says she doesn't know what she would have done without her health visitor.

"My health visitor recognised straightaway that I had PND," says Sarah. "She gave me all the options such as going on antidepressants or trying alternative therapies or having counselling. I didn't want to do that, but she also said that she would come and see me every week and if I just wanted to have a good cry that was fine, and she listened to me all the time. She even called me at home between visits just to check I was okay.

"She also organised for me to have one-to-one baby massage lessons which helped me bond with my baby and also got me involved in buggy mums, which is a keep fit class with other mums. She was marvellous – she really got me back on the straight and narrow."

Despite the clear necessity for health visitors, many vulnerable mums and their families are missing out because the service is being stretched to beyond breaking point.

According to a survey carried out by Netmums, 46 per cent of women only saw their health visitor once or twice in eight weeks following the birth.

After the first eight weeks, half of the mums were not invited in to see their health visitor nor visited at home by one in the first year following their initial visits.

And the disturbing statistics don't end there. In July 2008, the healthcare commission published a hard-hitting report which revealed some shocking findings of its own.

The report, *Towards better births: a review of maternity services in England*, revealed that 42 per cent of trusts have no access to a specialist perinatal health service for women with postnatal depression. The report also

identified numerous problems that included inadequate staffing and poor teamwork.

Unite has once again raised its continuing concerns in this area, saying that some NHS trusts could do more to improve maternity services.

"We are very concerned that mothers don't receive the level of emotional and practical support they require in the postnatal period," says Cheryll.

"Difficulties with maternal child attachment and other mental health problems can only have negative consequences for children and families. Emotional health issues are often unseen and have been subject to underinvestment in the past."

According to Cheryll, the report also highlights the need for additional support for teenage mums and those with learning difficulties in the weeks after birth and suggests that specialist midwife roles can be developed to meet these needs.

"These roles already exist in the form of health visitors, but cutbacks in health visiting have seen a major reduction in the number and quality of postnatal visits following the handover from the midwife at between ten and 14 days," she adds.

Last year, the government announced that it wanted to employ 4,000 more midwives in England over the next three years. Unite believes the next logical step would be a large boost to the health visitor workforce to mirror this investment.

Cheryll believes that an improved service to support parents in the postnatal period and beyond, delivered by well-trained health visitors is urgently needed. This is something that mums like Chloe and Sarah, who received unfailing support from their health visitors, would doubtlessly agree with.

"I cannot emphasise just how important they are," says Chloe. "Thank God for my health visitor and the rest of her team. Mine was, and still is, an ongoing story of just how good she has been for me and my family."