

Family and Health: Father Chris Bingley's charity helps those with post-natal depression

by Hilarie Stelfox, Huddersfield Daily Examiner

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It is almost two years since new mum Joanne Bingley took her own life after being severely affected by post-natal depression. This month marks the first anniversary of a memorial charity set up by her widower Chris, who is determined to improve care for those suffering from the condition. HILARIE STELFOX reports

THERE'S a wall of photographs in Chris Bingley's study that show his wife Joe, family and friends – in happier times.

The Joe that smiles back from the multiple images, which were framed by her, died nearly two years ago after taking her own life.

She was so depressed and desperate that she threw herself under a train, leaving her husband to care for their 10-week-old daughter, Emily.

Chris, 43, doesn't want this to happen to anyone else.

Twelve months ago the grieving widower decided to set up a charity, the Joanne (Joe) Bingley Memorial Foundation.

It was to serve two purposes – to campaign for justice for Joe and other women with post-natal depression who, it is claimed, were let down by failures in the health services and to help those with the condition to overcome it by improving those services.

Chris is utterly convinced that Joe, who was a nurse, did not receive the correct care for someone with post-natal depression. In fact, he has built up a dossier of documents that will ultimately form legal action against the health service providers who, he says, failed his family.

Asked how far he is prepared to go with such an action, he says: "The High Court. It will take us years.

"When Joe died I was so very, very angry that it was physically painful," he said.

"At that point in time a close friend of mine, Dr Martin Johnson, provided me with some information that really shook me.

"It was information on a GP network about what care Joe should have had – and didn't get.

"I began looking into it and found that there were 250 suicides of women with mental health problems between 2003 and 2009 in Yorkshire and Humberside which were never independently investigated."

He has since learned that the Care Quality Commission's own investigations found that 20% of all maternity services in this country are acting unlawfully by not adhering to proper care pathways and guidelines for the treatment of post-natal depression.

At Joe's inquest the coroner recorded a narrative verdict (at which no cause is attributed) and the CQ Commission is to inspect the crisis team responsible for looking after her.

It's probably fair to say that most of us would not know how to fight our way through the complex bureaucracy and structure of the NHS to demand copies of patient records and official documents, but Chris is a former corporate troubleshooter.

He has worked for major companies such as Barclays and the Post Office. A chartered accountant by profession, he knows how to extract information and get to the crux of a matter. Setting up a charity from scratch has not fazed him.

Chris, who lives in the family home in Fartown, believes that Joe would still be alive had she been referred to a specialist mother and baby psychiatric unit. Instead, after being diagnosed with PND, she was offered treatment at home.

He says that even while pregnant, Joe's mental health should have been of concern to the health professionals who saw her.

"At Joe's inquest the coroner said there was a history of mental health issues beyond reasonable doubt," he explained.

"She was referred for treatment for depression after having a miscarriage. The normal risk factor for post-natal depression is only 3% but if you have had it before then it rises to 50%.

"She had other risk factors – her mother had suffered from post-natal depression, her aunt had manic depression and a member of her family had killed himself.

"Joe had had Bell's palsy and cognitive behavioural therapy following a car accident – all in just five years. All that trauma and all those risk factors should have been picked up and they weren't, repeatedly."

In its first year the foundation has gathered a team of five trustees to take it forward.

“I have looked for and found the best,” said Chris.

Fundraising has begun and while the charity is still small, Chris has big plans.

He'd like to see the foundation eventually creating a mother and baby psychiatric unit and retreat in Huddersfield.

In the meantime the trustees have applied for grants and funding to run drop-in centres and found befriending groups. They are working with organisations such as Sure Start and have produced a leaflet for GPs that sets out the correct and legal care pathways for women with PND.

One of their achievements is becoming a founding member of the Maternal Mental Health Alliance, an organisation that brings together charities and health professionals so they have a single campaigning voice.

By setting up the memorial charity, Chris says he wanted to turn a negative into a positive, create a lasting memorial for Joe and find a way through his anger.

“I'm no longer angry,” he says. “I've realised there are so many more people involved in this issue than I first thought.

“Joe's death didn't just affect me, Emily, our friends and family. There was, for example, a seven-year-old on the platform at the station where Joe died and she saw the whole thing.

“Then there are the people who were on the train and the drivers, the emergency services and the mortician. It has huge implications for so many people.

“I'm doing this for all of them so that we can try to prevent this happening to others.”

“And I'm doing it for Emily. Because of her family history she has double the risk of suffering from post-natal depression if she has children.”

The Joanne (Joe) Bingley Memorial Foundation needs helpers and fundraisers. Information about its work can be viewed on www.joebingleymemorialfoundation.org.uk

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