

# **A personal view on the cuts facing Aldeburgh Hospital**

My Father worked at Aldeburgh Hospital for over 30 years until his retirement in 1989. Through him I gained an 'inside' view of what went on. In addition I occasionally had cause to use the facilities such as the physiotherapy department and the surgery, usually to deal with the aftermath of 'sporting' injuries incurred as a result of cycle crashes. Much has changed since my father's retirement and my knowledge of the current state of the hospital has gradually decreased. However I have always known that the Hospital was there should I or anyone else ever need it. It seems however that this is now changing, and not for the better.

## **The Minor Injuries Unit**

I am saddened and more importantly concerned by the closure of the Minor Injuries Unit (MIU). To illustrate my concerns I would like to relate the story of one incident from a few years ago.

On a Sunday afternoon in 1988 I suffered a reasonably high-speed crash on a racing cycle after skidding on a diesel spill just north of Halesworth. I managed to ride home, in some pain passing Halesworth Hospital (No A&E facilities). I also explained to a concerned policewoman who I happened to pass that I was fine, as I didn't want to make a fuss. On arriving home I was unsure how extensive the damage was and so I went to the surgery at Aldeburgh Hospital (the predecessor of the Minor Injuries Unit). The duty nurse cleaned and dressed my reasonable extensive road burns; I'd stopped from over 20mph in couple of metres or so. Dr McGough was called as I was suffering pain in my shoulder and after a thorough examination he concluded that I had only suffered a torn shoulder ligament and no further treatment, only rest, was required. Within a fortnight I was back on the bike.

Obviously this was minor injury and had the facility not been available at Aldeburgh I would have probably have had to travel to Ipswich, waited some time to be seen and effectively consumed the medical teams time which would have been better spent dealing with a more serious incident. I feel that it is exactly this type of scenario that the MIU was intended to deal with.

In the catchment area for Aldeburgh there are a number of small businesses that are involved in engineering and construction. Thankfully accidents are rare but when they do occur it is a great benefit to get the injuries treated as quickly as possible. By providing the services locally it saves time and travel in all but the more serious cases. If a case is deemed serious at an initial assessment then of course the escalation to a better-equipped hospital such as Ipswich can be actioned as appropriate.

We also have an active sailing community particularly at weekends, a lifeboat station and fire station with two more at Leiston and Saxmundham. Should a more major

incident occur then the local hospital would surely make a logical choice as a point to coordinate medical services and provide triage.

It is true that the doctor's surgery can provide minor injury cover, but this is only available during normal hours, not a 24-7 facility. In any case such attendance will likely necessitate a long wait for the patient and a degree of disruption to the normal running of the surgery's day. When staff numbers are low some disruption is inevitable whether that is at the doctor's surgery or at the hospital. It is my feeling that the hospital site will be better able to accommodate this disruption.

I am surprised to hear that the MIU has now effectively closed but the equipment has been retained in the hope that it will re-open. I for one sincerely hope it will re-open as Aldeburgh has many visitors who would naturally assume a hospital would be able to provide some sort of aid if injured. While the Geography may not be ideal Aldeburgh has for many years been a focal point for the surrounding area and its hospital is well known. The loss of the MIU now means that everybody must now be transported to Ipswich or Gorleston for treatment however minor their injuries are. This extra time and dislocation from the local community is often distressing especially for the elderly in our area. The extra transport also has an environmental impact, albeit small, and this pollution ultimately affects everybody's health.

## **Local Clinics and other services**

Although I am generally in good health and never suffer from any serious ailment I have recently incurred some kidney problems. As part of the initial investigation I had an ultrasonic scan, which to my surprise was performed on a Saturday at Aldeburgh Hospital. This rapidly led to an admission to Ipswich and the first of a series of operations. Whilst I would have been perfectly capable and prepared to make the journey to Ipswich, the convenience of having the scan locally cannot be over stated. I have since learnt, from the staff at Ipswich, that this is part of a new policy of outreach care, and that I was lucky to get seen so quickly as there is a waiting list for these services at Ipswich.

## **Loss of beds**

I know of several friends and relatives of mine who have spent time at Aldeburgh Hospital while recuperating. They have all felt a benefit from being there. They all feel more at home than they do in Ipswich. This is partly because the Aldeburgh Hospital is smaller and perceived as being more personal. And partly because it makes it easier for their friends and relatives to visit. Many of these visitors are themselves elderly and find the journey to Ipswich, Gorleston or Norwich tiring at best and some simply feel unable to travel these distances. We would do well to remember that not all in our community are young car drivers happy to do battle on the counties busiest roads, especially in the dark of a winter's night.

During my stay in Ipswich Hospital I heard an unsubstantiated story that in June the Heath Road site had been closed to all admissions over one weekend due to 100% bed occupancy. If this is indeed true surely there must be some way that better planned use of community hospitals such as Aldeburgh could reduce the likelihood of a recurrence of such a situation.

## **Funding and Bureaucracy**

I notice that Dr Ball has questioned the role of bureaucracy in the provision of local health care. I cannot say much on this except that there does seem to be an awful lot of paperwork. One of my fellow patients in Ipswich passed comment on this to a nurse who replied, tongue-in-cheek, that Ipswich Hospital 'gets through a rain forest every year'. Clearly some of this documentation is essential, but when the staff at the sharp end pass such comments one has to feel that some may be excessive. I know from my experience in industry that all too often it costs more to make a decision and do the paperwork than it costs to do the work required. It may not be possible to eliminate this problem completely but if it has become endemic it needs to be dealt with quickly. We cannot tolerate the absurdity of our highly trained and dedicated health care professionals being demoralised by unnecessary paperwork and lack of essential equipment simply because of an inappropriate and inflexible bureaucracy.

I appreciate that the local health authorities are trying to do a difficult job within the budgetary constraints set them by the government. But with the same government pushing the case for care in the community and easy access to local health services it seems that the provision of care *near* to the community is loosing out. It is obvious that proper nursing cannot be provided in the home on a 24-7 basis for the majority of patients, the staff and equipment simply are not available. It is exactly this care near to home that local hospitals such as that at Aldeburgh are surely intended for. These hospitals allow patients to receive proper medical supervision while making it easy for them to be visited by their friends and neighbours. The importance of these visits must not be underestimated in the care equation as they surely help to encourage the patient's recovery back to a normal life in the community.

I have written this in a hurry, so I hope this is reasonably coherent. In short I feel that the Aldeburgh Hospital should not be downgraded but be retained in its present form and ultimately the facilities enhanced and expanded as it appears was the authorities original intention before the current problems with their budget.



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## **A Personal Thank You**

On a separate note I would like to express my appreciation of the care I have received from all that have played a part in my recent treatment. I know from talking to my fellow patients that they were like me impressed not only by the standard of the medical staff and nurses but also by the part played by others such as the porters, cleaners and catering staff. It takes a lot of dedication and effort from all employees to make a large hospital run well, and the team at Heath Road are doing a superb job.

The media do a good job of uncovering bad practice; it needs to be rooted out. Maybe the BBC should now do a follow up to their recent exposes of poor practice by revealing how a good hospital provides the care we all deserve, regardless of who we are or where we live.