



London

Cite this as: *BMJ* 2023;381:p1059<http://dx.doi.org/10.1136/bmj.p1059>

Published: 24 May 2023

## BMJ INVESTIGATION

# “A healthcare assistant abused my daughter while she was in a mental health facility”

Kate shares her story as part of *The BMJ* and *Guardian's* investigation into sexual assault in the NHS

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Kate remembers the moment her daughter Emily (names changed), 21, told her that she had been sexually abused by a healthcare assistant in the mental health facility where she had been receiving treatment. “I remember getting the phone call from her saying what had happened,” says Kate. “She didn’t say, ‘I’ve been abused.’ She said, ‘I’ve been having a relationship with a member of staff.’ I was really shocked, and my first thought was, ‘Well, that’s wrong.’”

Emily was diagnosed with emotionally unstable personality disorder, a condition in which people experience intense and fluctuating emotions, at the age of 17. She had received years of treatment in mental health facilities after experiencing self-harm, suicidal thoughts, eating problems, and difficulties with interpersonal relationships. Her mother says that she attributed many of these issues to sexual abuse that Emily experienced as a child.

This sexual abuse meant that Kate was horrified when Emily told her that she had been in a relationship with a healthcare assistant who was supposed to be caring for her. Emily told her mother that they met when she was admitted to a mental health facility in the south west of England, but that the relationship began later when she was transferred to another facility nearby.

Emily told Kate that she exchanged messages with the healthcare assistant, and he would bring her chocolates as a gift. Kate took screenshots of the hundreds of messages on Emily’s phone.

Emily was being continually observed to check she wasn’t self-harming. She told her mother that when the healthcare assistant was on duty to observe her at night he would come into her room and close the door and that they began a sexual relationship. Emily said they engaged in sex acts every time he was on the rota at night. Kate thinks that Emily wanted to tell her about the relationship earlier than she did but was told by the healthcare assistant that he would lose his job. She thinks her daughter was “groomed” by him.

Emily later became overwhelmed by the relationship and wanted to cut off contact with the assistant. She told staff at a psychiatric hospital about the relationship, fearing he might have access to her if she was readmitted. The healthcare assistant was suspended, the police called, and an investigation began. The trust also carried out its own investigation, and a subsequent report made a series of recommendations, including a review of how patient observations are carried out and that staff should be trained in professional boundaries.

The police were not able to prosecute owing to a lack of evidence. Kate says that the abuse, combined with Emily’s mental health problems, put a huge strain on Emily. She died by suicide.

“She was surrounded by abuse, but she was the most loving, kind, and caring person you could ever meet,” says Kate. She thinks that sexual abuse, particularly in mental health facilities, is an ongoing problem that needs investigating. “I don’t understand why he would even abuse somebody that’s in a mental health facility,” Kate says. “This was a young girl. He knew her history; she had marks all over her body where she abused her body. She was really really unwell.”

This article has been funded by the BMJ Investigations Unit. For details see [bmj.com/investigations](http://bmj.com/investigations).