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BMJ INVESTIGATION

“I thought I would be safe in hospital, but I wasn’t”

Jade, who has multiple chronic health problems which require hospital admission, shares her story as part of *The BMJ* and *Guardian’s* investigation into sexual assault in the NHS. She has launched a claim against Derriford Hospital in light of the sexual assault she experienced there

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“One day at the beginning of November 2020 I had been told by my consultant to come down to Derriford Hospital because I was passing blood when I went to the loo. I was in the [emergency department] waiting room, and there was a man there who seemed agitated. He was rolling his eyes and getting very close to people with his mask off. He looked like he was constantly looking for a member of staff.

“Eventually I was called through to see a nurse, and I was put in a six bed processing area. The man appeared again, and I became worried about what he was doing, but nobody else seemed worried by him. Then I was moved to the ‘majors’ area, next to an old lady; we were both on trolleys. This man appeared again, he came to my bed and smiled and said, ‘You alright?’ So I smiled back. But I worried he might be trying to steal something.

“I told the nurse he was making me feel a bit uncomfortable, and she asked if I wanted to be put in a cubicle. It was right opposite the busy staff desk, so I said yes. She pulled the curtains around the cubicle. I hid my bag and phone under my legs because I wasn’t convinced that he was gone.

“He entered the cubicle and pulled the curtains shut. My heart started hammering so hard I was surprised the monitor didn’t go off. I thought he was going to steal my bag or my phone. He started to run his hand up my leg, and he pushed his crotch into the bars around my bed. He came really close to my face, pulled his mask right down, and said, ‘Does it hurt, does it hurt you real bad?’ in a very breathy, sexual way. I guess it was like dirty talk. He touched my face and continued to touch my legs and ran his hands down the side of my body.

“I looked around the bed, but I couldn’t find the call bell. It was up on the wall. I was trapped on the bed as I was attached to a cannula that was hooked up to the wall. I was having a thousand thoughts a second. Then I panicked, and I shouted, ‘Hello!’ Someone came and pulled the curtain back, and he immediately stepped back from the bed. The nurse asked if we were together. I said ‘no’ as he said ‘yes’ at the same time. I said, ‘No, we’re not, we’re not.’

“A couple of nurses came and took him away. And I was waiting for someone to ask how I was or what happened, but no one seemed to acknowledge what had just unfolded under their noses. I thought the doctor might talk to me about it when she came to speak to me, but she didn’t. Over the next few days, I told anyone that would listen—the coffee lady, the

lady who took my blood, other patients, and relatives—about what happened. The response I got was, ‘Oh gross, why are some men like that?’ as if he was a pervy man who had hit on me in a bar.

“Then a nurse overheard me talking about it and asked me to tell her the story. She took me to her office and asked if I wanted to report it to the police. Because of everyone’s reaction, I wondered if I was being overdramatic or making a fuss over nothing. But the police immediately logged it as a sexual assault. I broke down when I spoke to them because I was frustrated that I’d been so scared, and it had taken so long for someone to listen and acknowledge that what happened absolutely wasn’t ok. The police got CCTV footage from the hospital but decided not to pursue the case because the perpetrator had mental health issues.

“I’m disappointed the trust didn’t do more. The assault left me scared and anxious, and I was told I should approach my GP off my own back and basically source my own mental healthcare and support. I think there should be an alert on the system that tells the hospital when a patient needs trauma informed care. I’ve been left scared of having other procedures like colonoscopies. It shouldn’t be on the patient to have to explain during an appointment why they feel unsafe. It’s especially cruel when you have a long term condition like me and you have to rely on the NHS so much. I thought I would be safe in hospital, but I wasn’t.”

A spokesperson for University Hospitals Plymouth NHS Trust said: “Patient safety is our top priority. We take all allegations of assault, sexual or otherwise, very seriously. As the patient has outlined, this was reported to the police and our [Patient Advice and Liaison Services] team was involved. However, we recognise that the escalation of this was not as it should have been, and we could have better signposted to appropriate onward support services. We apologised to the patient in 2021 and reiterate that apology now.”