

Case Study

If you have a cough!

The moral of this case study is, if you have a persistent cough, it is vital that you ensure you are seen by a healthcare professional, or you could end up like Gina (name changed) who is now living with stage 4 lung cancer.

Healthwatch West Sussex Independent Health Complaints Advocacy Service (IHCAS) supported Gina to raise her complaints and have her voice heard since the stage 4 lung cancer diagnosis.

This is Gina's story.

2016

Back in 2016, Gina was 38 and a smoker, she presented herself to her GP 3 times that year and was sent for an x-ray, which was thought to be clear, and this is what was reported to the GP.

The NICE guidance [NG12] states if you are over 40 and have an unexplained cough, chest pain and shortness of breath, an x-ray should be undertaken within 2 weeks.

2017

Moving forward to 2017, Gina had 3 appointments with her GP relating to her cough and shortness of breath and again in 2018, Gina had 4 appointments with her GP about her cough and shortness of breath, the GP finally at the 5th appointment requested an x-ray.

Gina went to her local hospital for the x-ray and within 15 minutes of having the x-ray she received a call from her GP asking her to urgently return to the practice and she was then referred to her local acute hospital on a 2-week rule with suspected lung cancer.

After having a biopsy under a general anaesthetic, Gina was diagnosed with small cell lung cancer stage 4.

2018

She started treatment at the end of October 2018, and had 12 sessions of chemotherapy and also radiotherapy for a small tumour that was found on the top of her spine.

2019

Gina stopped treatment in 2019 and had follow up scans every 3 months.

Her husband met a Healthwatch West Sussex engagement team member at a support group and picked up information about the Independent Health Complaints Advocacy Service (IHCAS).

2020

Gina contacted our service in May 2020 and was allocated an advocate.

Her complaint was submitted to NHS England in July 2020, and whilst this was outside of the normal 12 months' complaint timeframe, it was agreed that due to the circumstances that Gina had been through, her complaint would be accepted and at the end of August 2020, Gina received her response from the GP and NHS England.

They had carried out a review of her medical files and had not found any evidence of poor care, and their response stated, **"our reviewer has not identified any particular cause for concern with the care and treatment you have received"**.

Not being satisfied with this response, Gina's advocate arranged a local resolution meeting at the GP practice to enable her to voice her concerns. This meeting took place in October 2020, and after receiving a follow up letter from the GP which she was still not satisfied with.

Gina, with support from her advocate, submitted her complaint to the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman (PHSO).

2021

Gina also discussed taking legal action against the GP and took advice from a legal service provider. The PHSO took on the case concerning the GP and reported back to Gina in November 2021 that there was no indication that anything went seriously wrong in her case.

However, the solicitor who had taken on the case on a no win no fee basis, looked over all of Gina's medical files, and was just about to give up when he came across the x-ray taken in 2016.

This was sent to a specialist for review and because of that review it was noted that the **radiologist had missed "an enlarged lymph node (16mm)"**.

This was the missing evidence that something had gone wrong in the diagnosis process.

2023

At the end of 2023, Gina settled her case with the radiologist out of court.

The money she received has helped the family move forward and build special memories.

The last 5 years

Gina was given a 0.1% chance of surviving 5 years. However, in October 2023, Gina was told she was cancer free. During this entire period, Gina supported her family of 3, including 1 child with additional needs. It took a long time for them to accept that their Mum was going to die of lung cancer and so many times, Gina had practiced in her head how she was going to say goodbye to her children.

When Gina was told that she was cancer free, and explained this to her children, they were understandably very confused and did not understand that firstly they were being told that Mum has 0.1% chance of living and then to be told she is cancer free.

Because of this, the children have lost faith and trust in the NHS. They are angry and will no longer visit a GP.

Unfortunately, this process has not ended for Gina. She was told in a call that her scan was clear, but that medical professionals needed to read the full report. Gina reported at the beginning of 2024, that she had a pain in her lung, and she was told the scan was clear, but it was then discovered that there were abnormalities on the scan with her lymph nodes.

No one had followed up these abnormalities and she is now currently awaiting the outcome of more tests.



Feedback from Gina and her children:

“On contacting Healthwatch IHCAS, (the advocate) has stood by me throughout the whole process, made me feel listened to, believed and understood.

(The advocate) has always remembered to keep in contact and with her support to write this case study has been incredible. I always knew that she believed in me and held my hand and never gave up”

“Gina’s children say thank you for helping Mum”.