

A close-up, shallow depth-of-field photograph of a person's hand holding a blue pen over a document. The hand is wearing a grey, textured sweater. The background is blurred, showing a desk with a white cup and some papers. The lighting is soft and natural, suggesting an indoor setting.

Alison's Story

A timeline of key events

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Timeline:

July/August 1987 – my sister Alison experiences psychosis and is sectioned to an NHS mental health hospital in Carlisle, Cumbria, called Garlands, she is 21. On her admission staff at the hospital note how disturbed she is. Alison is discharged in the autumn and becomes an outpatient of the hospital.

Mid December 1987 – Alison is readmitted to Garlands as an inpatient. She is discharged in late January 1988 and becomes an outpatient in the care of NHS mental health services. Unknown to us, an older trainee mental health nurse has been taking a close and entirely inappropriate interest in her.

August 12th 1988 – Alison has an abortion at Carlisle City Hospital as a result of illegal sex acts committed by an NHS employee on hospital premises. Her crisis pregnancy and the acts of the trainee nurse are known about by staff at Garlands hospital. The abortion is arranged by the consultant psychiatrist tasked with her care. At this point, nobody outside the NHS is aware what has happened. The police are not informed and the events are omitted from selected medical records. The offender and the consultant who helped conceal what happened remain in the employment of the NHS mental health hospital.

Late August 1988 – Alison leaves Cumbria to be with mum in Doncaster and becomes a patient of NHS mental health services in South Yorkshire. Later that year she confides in mum, telling her what happened when she was in the Garlands at Carlisle. The matter is not discussed again. Alison and mum are now the only two people outside the NHS who know what has gone on.

December 13th 1991 – Alison steps in front a train at Rotherham Railway Station. The date is around what would have been the 3rd birthday of her baby. She is an inpatient of NHS mental health services in Doncaster at the time. The Coroner at the inquest is unaware of the events preceding Alison's suicide, and records an open verdict into her death. Mum is now the only person outside the NHS who knows what has happened. We buried Alison on Christmas Eve, she was 25.

December 1999 – a chance conversation with my Mum leads to my older sister Sarah and I becoming aware of what happened to Alison in 1988 for the first time. To say we are "surprised" would not cut it.

January 2001 – we agree an approach and on behalf of my family I coordinate contact with the NHS and police in Cumbria. I explain what occurred and ask them to work together to investigate the individual and the hospitals management. Both organisations assure me of their cooperation. Years later this first investigation will be publicly discredited and Cumbria police forced to admit that they did not treat the allegations seriously.

Feb 2001 – I request copies of Alison's medical records and am told they will be made available. However, within a matter of days I am informed by the NHS that they were mistaken and that all medical records, two sets of separate documents held at separate hospitals, have been destroyed. I am perplexed and disappointed but ascribe the error to incompetence rather than deliberate collusion.

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Summer 2001 – frustrated by a lack of progress, I locate copies of medical notes at a GP Practice in Doncaster. These show Alison was in the care of the NHS at the time the abortion occurred. Copies of all these documents are sent to the Chief Executive of the NHS in Carlisle, Cumbria police and the coroner. The coroner thanks me for the information, saying what I have provided is significant.

February 2002 – Cumbria police inform us they have interviewed a suspect but the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) have decided there is not enough evidence to take the case to court. We are disappointed and confused, and ask them to revisit their decision. They direct us to the CPS who do not reply to our letters. At this point we are unaware Cumbria police have not interviewed anyone and have mislaid all the documents given to them. They have sent an incomplete case-file to the CPS.

February 2002 – the Chief Executive of North Cumbria NHS sends my family a strangely worded apology expressing his regret for the events that occurred. It will become clearer in later years that the phrasing he has used has been chosen very carefully. At this point we are also unaware that he has not shared the crucial medical documents and records we sent to him in Summer 2001, with Cumbria police.

Spring 2002 – my family and I lick our wounds and decide to get on with our lives. Though bitterly disappointed we console ourselves by thinking that Cumbria police and North Cumbria NHS did their very best for us and for Alison; why wouldn't they have? We are naivety incarnate.

December 13th 2011 – 20yrs to the day since Alison's death I am successfully interviewed for what looks like an incredible job working for the NHS in Cumbria. I quickly find out the culture is not conducive to those with a strong moral compass unafraid to speak truth to power. My penchant for putting the needs of patients and their families first makes me very unwelcome in the echo chambers of NHS management corridors. I am slowly, subtly but surely ostracized, bullied, belittled and ultimately reduced to tears in front the team I work in. Work becomes increasingly hostile and mentally unbearable.

Summer 2015 – after a month off work with stress and depression, I visit a private sector psychologist for help. The irony of meeting a man on the edge of despair who works for an NHS Mental Health Trust is not wasted on her. I am increasingly conflicted by the gap I see between the stated values of the Trust I work for and its behaviors. Seeing first-hand how defensive and insular the culture is and witnessing how wrongdoing is covered-up is reawakening memories. Tragic situations are managed so the Trust is never criticized and I am starting to wonder if my families experience of the NHS is a natural by-product of a broken culture rather than the one-off incident I previously thought. I am questioning where I belong. My Psychologist quickly gets to the heart of the matter and suggests I contact Cumbria police to ask them to revisit and reopen an investigation into the events leading to Alison's suicide.

August 2015 – allaying the fears of loved ones I pluck up the courage to contact Cumbria police to see if they will revisit Alison's case and the events of 1988. Two senior police officers come to my home and try to convince me there is nothing to be gained from looking at the case again. They assure me that the first investigation was of a good standard, and conducted by reputable and reliable police officers. This turns out to be an untruth for which they will eventually have to apologize. Despite numerous requests Cumbria police have never explained why they tried to mislead my family and I about this matter.

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Summer 2016 – following a lengthy complaint process culminating in a successful appeal, Cumbria police launch an internal review into the investigation they undertook in 2001/02. The review is damning and they are forced to launch a new investigation into events at Garlands mental health hospital in 1988. The contents of the internal review are so damaging that Cumbria police refuse to share it with us.

Feb 2017 – almost 30yrs after committing his offences the former NHS employee is interviewed by Cumbria police for the first time in connection with the events of 1988. When presented with the original evidence we provided in 2001, he finally admits his actions under caution. He goes on to tell the police that Alison's psychiatrist, along with numerous others, was fully aware of what was going on.

May 2017 – Cumbria police inform us that even though they are now in possession of the relevant supporting documents, copies of the medical records, and a confession, the CPS have decided not to prosecute the individual in question. They say it is not in the public interest. We appeal their decision.

December 2017 – Our appeal to the CPS fails. We are utterly devastated and arrange to meet them.

May 2018 – We meet senior prosecutors from the CPS and ask them to explain their decision not to prosecute someone for sexual offences committed on a vulnerable mentally ill young woman in the care of the NHS. They are unmoved and tell us they will block any attempts to pursue a private prosecution.

Spring 2019 – INQUEST, a national charity providing support for the bereaved in relation to deaths that occur in the care of the state, help us with a crowd-funding campaign. This is to raise the funds to pay legal fees in an attempt to obtain a fresh inquest into Alison's death. The £8,000 required is raised.

May 05th 2020 - on what would have been Alison's birthday I self-publish a book, Lions, Liars, Donkeys and Penguins - The Killing of Alison, to help me try and make sense of things and highlight what has happened. Being able to put my thoughts down on paper turns out to be the best therapy I have ever had.

Spring 2021 – our crowdfunded appeal to quash the original inquest of 1992 and secure a new one is currently underway; correspondence is with the Attorney General's Office. The future remains unwritten...

