OBITUARY

Rosamund Snow: researcher and campaigner for patients’ involvement in healthcare

(born 1971, died by suicide on 2 February 2017)

On her first day as The BMJ’s Patient Editor in 2014, Rosamund Snow disclosed that a favourite pastime of hers was watching classic episodes of Coronation Street. Early storylines in the long-running ITV soap were a particular draw, she said, especially rows between Ena Sharples, the street’s self-appointed moral guardian, and Elsie Tanner, the middle-aged, single mother looking for the elusive Mr Right. Snow admired Elsie’s spirited struggles to gain understanding and respect, and her resilience in the face of censorious neighbours who lazily stereotyped her.

It is tempting to speculate that Rosamund may have drawn parallels between Elsie’s battle for recognition and a similar one waged by patients. Like Elsie they are often misunderstood, marginalised, and excluded from conversations. Snow fought to place patients centre stage in debates about service quality improvement and medical education.

Hers was a truly portfolio career, which at the time of her death at the age of 46 straddled The BMJ, an academic research post at Oxford University’s Nuffield Department of Primary Care Health Sciences, and a collaboration with DeepMind, Google’s artificial intelligence research venture, where she advised on its patient and public involvement strategy.

Diagnosed with Type 1 diabetes as a teenager, one of Snow’s first forays into service user research was in 2008, when a consultant at her outpatient clinic in Oxford asked if she would help to investigate its 15.7% DNA (did not attend) rate. Her audit showed that in 61% of cases the patient did not attend.

Her audit showed that in 61% of cases patients had either not been told of the appointment (often because a change of address had not been recorded) or they had spent up to 20 minutes trying to get through by telephone, often without success.

Describing herself as a “critical friend of the NHS” when she addressed a TEDxNHS event in 2016 (https://player.vimeo.com/video/196716331), she urged her audience to involve patients in service quality improvement, saying: “All you have to do is ask us. And we can turn your bag full of question marks into a lightbulb moment”.

Snow’s ‘lightbulb’ career moment was in 2009, when her partner, Stephen Barton (the two had met while working at the Royal Society of Medicine), noticed a newspaper advertisement for paid PhD programmes at King’s College London. At the time she was part of Transport for London’s research team, investigating the information needs of the capital’s 22 500 bus drivers.

She secured funding for both a master’s degree in research and a PhD, which she gained in 2013 (her thesis was entitled ‘The role of patient expertise inside and outside the health system: patient education in diabetes’).

In her role at Oxford, she helped to develop patient involvement in curriculum design and taught communication skills to medical students, working alongside GP principal Helen Salisbury.

Salisbury says: “Rosamund was intensely curious and keen to sort problems out from the ground level up. She was full of ideas, and so challenging. She really made you see things in a different light and had this way of questioning systems when she felt they weren’t working.”

“...and for only a third of the price.”

“ ...you are a patient who cannot work.”

“...a patient who has not been interviewed.”

“...a patient who has not been asked.”

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“For example, she was testing the hospital feedback systems. There was a suggestion box on the ward. She posted some ideas with her contact details, but heard nothing.”

Instead Snow turned to Twitter, posting updates about the hospital’s failure to respond.1

Despite being an Oxford academic, Snow was decidedly intimidating, but in the best possible way.

Snow leaves Stephen; her parents, Mary and Gordon; two stepdaughters; and three stepgrandchildren.


REFERENCES

1 BMJ Patient Editor. 2017. twitter.com/ BMJPatientEd/status/821333630740450304
