



## **Mental Health: Lennox Castle**

*Gathering testimony*

### **Howard Mitchell**

At a simple level, we have little documentary evidence of what the physical environment was like. We have photographs of the outside of the wards. We don't really have many photographs of inside. And I think photographs wouldn't do justice to the actual living conditions that were there. There is nothing to say what it's like to be sleeping in an environment where there were thirty beds side by side only eighteen inches apart. We have nothing to sort of document what it's like to be sixteen naked men and women crammed into a bathroom, on a production line for a bathing afternoon. We've nothing that documents what it's like to be in bed sort of twenty three and a half hours a day, for years and years and years on end. So just not the minutiae of every day life, but the every day existence.

I think certainly latterly the public perception of Lennox Castle, was very negative. There were many instances that are reported in the press, of individuals being neglected I think, rather than abused, would be the right term. Bad conditions. Over crowding. Controversy. Accidental deaths. The national newspapers reported fairly frequently an instance like this. So, when that's all that the general public hear about a place like that, the perception tends to be quite negative. And while I endorsed many of the negative perspectives, I also knew that there were positive sides, that I wanted to illustrate and bring out as well.

I think the outside public sees a great deal of sort of poignancy through the oral history side. But I think on the other side of things as well, they might get a clear understanding of what it was like to work there as well. And I've always been very conscious to reflect not just the multitudes of individuals who, be they patients, be they doctors, be they nurses, be they workers there, in any capacity, to give as full a picture as possible, of what it was like to experience Lennox Castle.

I suppose the areas that I didn't touch on with people, are direct issues of abuse. I didn't directly seek them out, or ask people 'did you see a lot of physical, verbal abuse? Can you describe that? You know. How often did it go on?' Because first of all, I didn't really want to dwell on that. I think it's insinuated at some points. I think people mention it. But I wanted to sort of challenge the stereotypes of the institution rather than confirm them.

And undoubtedly there are many people, probably the majority of people who can't tell of their experiences. Where we can only get it sort of second, third hand. I've attempted to interview people who had a relative. They had a close relative. So they can describe from their perspective. But, undoubtedly that is a large hole.

I think anybody that's worked in oral history, gets to know if somebody is genuine. If they're genuinely trying to express their experience. And after all that's what we are looking for. An individuals experience. Rather than an account of things that might be right or might be wrong. Or might be accurate or inaccurate. We're having people talk about their own lives and their own experiences. And while some people might exaggerate their own experiences, in my experience I don't think I've interviewed anybody who I've felt was actually lying.

Sitting down and asking people questions about their life, about themselves, who might not otherwise have had the time taken to probe them and appreciate them and listen to them is an alluring thing. And people often drop their guards and say things that they don't wish to be on public record. And I think there's a lot of things that I wouldn't make available to the public. And a lot of areas I deliberately stayed away from, from certain individuals. Because I wouldn't want them to commit that type of thing to the public record.

Do I edit the primary source material? Do I protect people from themselves? I don't want to over emphasize this, because it's a small part, and it's not on every interview. But, it's there.

Another aspect of the ethical issues is probably consent of vulnerable people. And obviously people with learning disabilities are vulnerable individuals. And I've attempted to make people's consent as informed as possible. And I've in several instances recorded the discussion about consent. So that that forms part of the oral history, the consent is there for all to see that the process of it, not just the people with learning disabilities, but all individuals are vulnerable in certain ways. And there is an attempt to make everybody aware of what the material is going to be used for.

I'm very very glad that I got involved before the hospital closed. Many oral history projects are done from the perspective of we want to reclaim some of the past, that's already gone. Let's talk to people who are old, and that can remember this type of thing, because it's disappeared already, and we want to record them before they disappear. I was involved in an oral history project, that was documenting something that was disappearing, while it happened. And asking people to reflect back, yes, to their past and their past involvement, but to the present changing circumstances.

Most people responded extremely positively, in that they were delighted to talk about their involvement. Because most people certainly that worked there, had a sense of pride about the place. Big important part of the social working life. And a kind of desire to set the record straight and leave a legacy.

They might have worked there for a long long time and did their very best. And I wanted to portray that there were good people. And I think that comes across in the oral history. That even although they worked there, through times when the institution didn't do a very good job of looking after people with learning disabilities, that bad job was imposed upon them from the circumstances, and not often from the individuals not being well intentioned.

I can't think there was any unexpected emotions. I possibly expected it with some former residents, who are looking back on their times there, and had quite negative feelings about it. Many of them expressed that but nobody seemed to become distressed at all.

The ethical issues are about my own power in this situation. Although I am trying to illustrate across a wide range of individuals, what the place was like, obviously who I choose is up to me. And by making these choices, and dictating what the eventual picture is like, by editing any produced material, you put certain slants across. You are trying to establish what you feel should be established. And I think that's a powerful position to be in. And I would like to think that I didn't try to abuse that power.