

## Debate on NHS is so necessary

Conservative MP Owen Paterson will no doubt stimulate much debate with his controversial remarks about the NHS.

Mr Paterson believes one of Britain's great institutions is no longer fit for purpose. He is determined to inject a sense of realism by challenging popular opinion and attacking what he describes as the "mythology" that surrounds our health service.

Far from being one of the finest health systems in the world, Mr Paterson says care in the UK lags behind that available in other developed nations. He believes it is time for an independent review into standards so that we can see how the system might be improved.

The North Shropshire MP is brave to criticise one of the nation's sacred cows. And though he will incur the wrath of political opponents, some of those who work in the health service and others who disagree, his remarks may have a positive effect. Indeed, some health workers and administrators who experience delays, funding shortfalls and organisational inefficiencies might even find themselves agreeing with him.

Those who have watched the Future Fit saga in Shropshire closely may find it difficult to dispute his remarks, for instance. In Shropshire, millions have been pumped into the NHS in recent years but confusion surrounds the future of A&E services as well as maternity and child services.

Whether or not that means health services are not fit for purpose is an entirely different matter. There are many who would argue that Mr Paterson is wrong. There are those who would point to the NHS's many successes as well as the everyday miracles performed by staff who prolong life and improve its quality.

There are administrators who would argue that maintaining control of the logistical side of the NHS is a Herculean endeavour and that they perform tasks that are just as remarkable as their colleagues on the frontline.

Perhaps we should look at the bigger picture. Whether or not Mr Paterson is right is not the issue. His call for scrutiny and a broader discussion is welcome.

Unless we are able to properly critique and challenge the NHS, we will not be able to address the fundamental challenges it faces as an organisation in the modern age. If only for encouraging discussion, Mr Paterson's forthright views are welcome.

## New boss Hurst can be a success

If Paul Hurst fancied a challenge, he'll find it at Shrewsbury Town FC.

The League One club is moored to the bottom of the table and Hurst will have to inspire his new charges if he is to ensure the Shrews' prosperity.

The club have made a bold move in appointing the former Grimsby boss, who made his name as a no-nonsense defender at Rotherham United.

Hurst has a good reputation and has a good knowledge of lower league football.

He has brought his trusted lieutenant with him, Chris Doig, and they hope to make the type of progress that former Shrews boss Micky Mellon was unable to.

Hurst has every opportunity to write his name into Shrewsbury Town folklore.

Though the club has endured a tough start to the season, it is well run and has excellent reputation and good facilities.

It is also well supported by fans and local businesses alike and there is a genuine desire in Shropshire for it to progress.

If Hurst can bring success to the League One club, he will become a fan favourite. It will not be easy given the Shrews' current league standing but both he and Shrewsbury Town must embrace the opportunity.

## COMMENT AND ANALYSIS



Outside their office at the Park Lane Centre in Woodside are Carl Dowd-Mackenzie, Scott Morgan and Martin Cantrill

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Christmas music blared from the sound system, the tills were jangling.

As shoppers poured in and out of the bustling shops around Shrewsbury town centre, few people paid attention to Martin Cantrill as he prepared to bed down for the night on the frosty street.

"It was a rubbish time. It was horrible," he said. "Had I not done something about it, I would have probably robbed a jeweller's. If I had been caught, I would have gone to prison and wouldn't have had to worry about anything. If I hadn't I would have got a lot of money. Either way I would have been better off."

That was December 2014. As he trades banter with his colleagues Carl Dowd-Mackenzie and Scott Morgan in their small office at Telford's Park Lane Centre, it seems hard to believe that just two years ago his life was at rock bottom.

### Despair

All three men have come back from the brink of addiction and despair. For Carl, it was alcohol. His low point came when he was sleeping in his car, dashing out to the office the moment it opened in the morning. For Scott and Martin it was a combination of drugs and drink.

The three have all seen their lives turned around by the A Better Tomorrow organisation, founded by reformed alcoholic Paul Gallagher and his partner Kath Livingstone in 2014. Now they work full-time for the organisation, using their own experiences to help others get their lives back on track.

"The lads will listen to us because we've done it, we've lived their lives," says Carl. "It is different listening to people like us, rather than someone who has just read about it in a book."

"We are living proof that you can come through the other side."

Of the three, Martin has probably had the darkest experiences.

"I was addicted to alcohol and drugs for 30 years," says Martin. He has served two prison sentences for robbery, and was twice sectioned under the Mental Health Act over fears he would take his own life. But, now 44, he is relaxed and jocular as he talks about how his life has changed over the past couple of years.

Now a full-time drug and alcohol support worker for the group, he says the biggest joy now is being able to see people make the same journey that he does.

Since its launch, the Telford-based organisation has helped 109 people deal with their addictions. Of these, 17 per cent are now in full-time work and a further 20 per cent do voluntary work. Only two per cent have been readmitted to hospital and not one has been in trouble with the police. "For every £1 spent on recov-



Back to work – Carl Dowd-Mackenzie has turned his life around after his drinking got out of hand

ery, society saves £2.50, and when you look at some of the costs and savings, this is why A Better Tomorrow can and is making a big difference," says Martin, adding that every 12-month prison sentence costs the taxpayer £65,000.

"We have had 38 high-risk clients that have not re-offended, this is equal to a £2.47 million saving," he said. "This would increase considerably if you add the 71 low-risk clients that have committed minor offences in the past, and would likely to have done so again if they had not engaged with ABT."

The project started out with a single four-bedroom house in the Woodside area of Telford, and Scott, who is now the scheme's manager, was its first client.

Today, it has seven houses across Telford, providing accommodation for 28 people. Plans are now in place to open up houses in Shrewsbury in the new year, and ABT has agreed a deal with a landlord to offer a similar service to people with mental health problems.

Carl says: "We can literally take in clients who own nothing except the clothes on their backs and we are solely funded by the housing benefit we receive for each client."

"Every client is seen by a support worker seven days a week, including Christmas Day and other bank holidays. They are also subject to regular alcohol checks."

The project runs weekly football sessions, access to volunteering and training schemes, as well as days out and team-building activities.

Martin adds: "A lot of people have difficulty with the basics. They forget

about how to cook meals, clean the house and look after themselves. We make sure that when they leave here they are ready to live on their own and that they are work-ready."

Martin moved into ABT accommodation on Christmas Eve, 2014, and describes it as one of his best Christmas-es ever.

"After I was released from Redwoods, a mental health hospital, I was living on the streets in Shrewsbury," he says.

"I didn't want to go back to Telford for fear of mixing with old acquaintances. I thought I would be better off living on the streets."

Martin started getting help with his drinking at this time and was put in touch with the Ark charity for the homeless. He made contact with the Salvation Army's Kip project, which provided him with temporary accommodation, and it was here that he heard about ABT.

"I moved in on Christmas Eve," he says. "I had been due to go for Christmas dinner as a homeless person with the Salvation Army on Christmas Day, but instead I was helping as a volunteer. It was really positive. I felt that for the first time there was a change, it was the start of something new. I had been clean since November 19. My birthday was on December 29 and New Year's Eve is something that most people look forward to. I felt fine for the first time."

Carl's problems began two years ago, when he was 39, at what should have been an exciting period in his life.

"I left my job after being offered another job as manager of a new call centre and it was during the period

between leaving my old job and taking up the new one that my drinking got out of hand," he says.

Around the same time, he was affected by the deaths of several close friends and family members and he turned to the bottle for comfort.

"Before I knew it I had a problem. I was drinking three or four bottles of red wine at the worst point. I would wake up in the morning and I would be shaking," he says. "I would have a drink and then I would be all right for a bit, but then I would need another one. I was sleeping in the car because my parents didn't want me going back to the house because of the state I was in. I would go to sleep in the car and then going to the shop as soon as it opened the next morning to buy some more drink."

Things came to a head one night when he drove to a secluded spot in Lightmoor to bed down for the night, but could not start his car the next day.

"I had run out of petrol and I had to ring my mum to pick me up. She dragged me down to the doctors that day and it saved my life," he says. "If she had not done that I wouldn't be here today."

The road to recovery is never easy, says Scott, whose drinking resulted in several stays in hospital. Some of the clients drop out of the programme, finding the experience just too difficult, but most of them come back in the end.

To get in touch with A Better Tomorrow email office@abettertomorrow.org.uk, write to A Better Tomorrow, Park Lane Centre, Woodside, Telford, TF7 5QZ or call 07970 695987.

## PETER RHODES



AS Moscow's finest continue their cruise to the war in Syria, we have a useful demonstration of what our armed forces could realistically do in the event of a massive Russian armada steaming up the Channel in wartime. Wave.

FRAUGHT moments in channel hopping. By some mischance I landed on Anne Robinson's Britain (BBC1) to find Ms Robinson being prepared for an enema. There should be some sort of warning. Another unintended stop was at The Apprentice (BBC1) where one hopeful was referring to 'sumfink'. You have to wonder how serious someone in their 20s is about their career when they still have the pronunciation of a toddler. Try elocution, or sumfink.

UKIP is in a bad way. With no permanent leader, no unity and no clear policy programme, it is like a ship without a rudder. Why did this crisis flare into the "handbags at dawn" scrap at the EU in Brussels which hospitalised Steven Woolfe?

Here's a guess.

Britain currently sends 73 Members of the European Parliament (MEP) to Brussels. Of these, 13 are Ukip MEPs.

The difference between them and the other 60 is that the Ukip contingent are working tirelessly

for Britain to quit the EU. This, of course, will cost all 73 UK MEPs their seats, plus their £96,000-a-year salary and another £100,000 or so in staff costs, office support, travel and attendance allowances. Being an MEP is one of the cushiest jobs in public life and every Ukip MEP is engineering not only his/her own redundancy but that of his 12 Ukip comrades and all the other Brits. I would image the mood among MEPs post-Brexit is at frazzling point. Handbags at dawn? I bet we see blood on the carpets before this is over.

THERE is something in the Welsh spirit that lends itself to tragedy. I cannot imagine ordinary folk from any other nation speaking so lyrically and profoundly about the agony of Aberfan, 50 years ago this month. They have only to open their mouths and poetry comes out. I was moved by the testimony of Jeff Edwards, the last child recovered alive from the buried school. He grew up to be a local hero, running projects for redundant miners. But he decided that he would never have children because, as he told the BBC, he felt the disaster had "corrupted his DNA". As he put it: "Your personality has changed to such a degree your traits, your make-up, your being has been so fundamentally altered you wouldn't want to perpetuate it." I have interviewed hundreds of survivors of warfare, men and women who witnessed, and sometimes did, the most bestial of things and cannot recall anyone coming to that same bleak conclusion, or laying bare the raw depths of their nightmares so clearly.

THE Siege of Jadotville is a new film about the Zulu-style defence of a United Nations outpost by Irish soldiers in the Congo in 1961. Yet even a new film cannot resist that old movie cliché, the miracle of the clinking bullet. An officer is shot and rushed to the medic who digs out the bullet with tweezers and drops it – clink! – into the obligatory tin dish. In less than 30 seconds, the officer is as right as ninepence. No clink, no cure. Similar sightings welcome.

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