

Witness Name: Carole Steele
of Scottish Covid Bereaved
Statement No.: 1
Exhibits:
Dated: 9th July 2024

UK COVID-19 INQUIRY

WITNESS STATEMENT OF CAROLE STEELE ON BEHALF OF SCOTTISH COVID BEREAVED

I, Carole Steele, will say as follows: -

1. I am giving a statement in relation to the tragic death of my son, Andrew D W Steele, from Covid, on 2nd January 2021. My son was 28 years old when he died (DOB 28.07.1992) and he lived at his home in I&S with his girlfriend. He was an Architectural Technician and had studied at Strathclyde University and then Edinburgh Napier University. He was a very talented young man and artist and had matured into the most genuinely loving and gentle person. He was a former Tae Kwon Do black belt Scottish champion. He was working / furloughed for his employer (an Architects' Co.) from his home during the lockdown and was extremely careful at following the Covid rules.
2. Andrew contracted Covid from his girlfriend and tragically on his tenth day of isolation at home he deteriorated suddenly and suffered a cardiac arrest due to a blood clot caused by Covid. He had called NHS24 the day before, as his symptoms were not improving and was advised to wait another day. I feel there were failures on the part of his girlfriend's employer, who did not do their utmost to protect her from Covid and on the part of the NHS (NHS24) who failed to triage his request for help correctly and thoroughly. I feel that the NHS was under immense pressure, and I know that our local hospital was at capacity at the time of Andrew's illness. I

also believe that the NHS / medical profession should have been informing the general public that patients at risk were not solely the “elderly and the vulnerable”.

3. I became aware of the “Scottish Covid Bereaved” group and discovered other bereaved families who had experienced similar tragedies. We all knew the depth or each other’s grief. This in turn led me to Aamer Anwar & Co who is representing the Scottish Covid Bereaved at the Inquiries. It has been very difficult to keep notes, attend meetings and make statements since Andrew’s death, but I feel it is important that what happened to our loved ones is known.
4. Andrew did not have any pre-existing medical conditions. He was healthy, fit and ate a healthy diet. He had set up a small “at home gym” in his home office during the lockdown. His only ailment was an allergy to pollen i.e. “hay fever”.
5. Andrew lived with his girlfriend in their apartment, in the same town as us. During lockdown, Andrew worked predominately from home and was extremely careful about following the Covid-19 rules. As was his girlfriend.
6. In the beginning, Andrew’s girlfriend was working from home as well. She worked as an office assistant for a bakery company and initially worked from home, which then graduated to a workplace rota arrangement with other employees in her workplace. Her employer had provided laptops for home working, but they started to insist that employees work in the office more. In Autumn 2020, I remember being concerned when they told us she was being asked to go in to work more often.
7. I know that Health and Safety did a spot check on the business and were not happy with them having even two people in the office. I have a lot of evidence and amongst this is screenshot of a message from Andrew’s girlfriend’s line manager saying that they didn’t want more than two people in the office in case there was another spot check.
8. I know that Andrew’s girlfriend believed that the correct safety procedures were not being strictly followed. Within the office itself there was no room for social distancing, no ventilation and it was not possible to stay 2 meters apart. They only had one hand sanitiser outside the office, only wore masks when they went to the

bathroom, and had more people in the office than they should have had. Two additional staff members would come in and out of the office at times. Additionally on a Friday, they wanted three people in the office, as this was their busiest day.

9. Mid-December 2020, there was an outbreak of COVID-19 at Andrew's girlfriend's work. The manager caught it first along with a delivery driver who came into the office. Andrew's girlfriend received a message from her manager informing her that she had tested positive for COVID-19, and that she had been contacted by Test and Protect to advise her to isolate. Andrew's girlfriend was also contacted and told to isolate.
10. Andrew's girlfriend began to experience Covid symptoms and went for a test. The test result came back on 21 December 2020, and it was positive. Andrew went for a test and the result came back on 23 December 2020 as positive. Andrew's girlfriend's sister, who was staying with them at the time, also tested positive. At the time it was law to isolate at home for 10 days from the onset of your symptoms, until your symptoms were no more.
11. Andrew's girlfriend and her sister recovered quickly from Covid during isolation. Andrew seemed to get a new symptom every day. He had a fluctuating temperature, then a loss of taste and smell. He had a cough and was extremely tired. He seemed to be progressing through all the symptoms. He would recover from one and then get another. According to the information we were all given at the time, there didn't seem to be anything abnormal about Andrew's symptoms and the way he was feeling. He was like this on his ninth day, and it seemed the wisest thing to do was to call NHS24 for advice / help. There didn't seem to be any public awareness of the dangers of Covid to the "Non-vulnerable members of the population".
12. The advice at the time from the Government / NHS was to "stay at home" and to phone NHS24 on the ninth / tenth day if there was no improvement in your symptoms.

13. As Andrew experienced all the symptoms over the period of his illness, when the ninth / tenth day approached, he just didn't seem to be improving / getting better. I advised Andrew and his girlfriend to call NHS24, but when they did on his ninth day (31 December 2020), the call handler advised them "to wait another day".
14. Andrew had a cough, heavier breathing, fluctuating temperature, tiredness and thirst. Andrew spoke to the advisor himself. He was told to "try and get through things". As Andrew didn't live in the same home as us, I was not present for the call. This information was given to me partly by Andrew and his girlfriend, prior to and after his death.
15. I have a copy of the "Doctor on Call" report, given to me by my doctor's surgery, which lists details of the call. The call lasted 13 minutes and the outcome of the call is detailed as "Patient given self-care advice".
16. I believe that the call handler / NHS should have been more vigilant and proactive with this call for advice / help, especially as there is evidence that Emergency departments were aware of younger casualties at that time. I was also aware that the local hospital was at capacity during this period.
17. Why was my son not advised to attend hospital? Why was a call handler given the responsibility to make these decisions? Were they sufficiently qualified and experienced to do so?
18. On 1 January 2021, the day after his call to NHS24, Andrew seemed to feel slightly better. We were communicating via "Messenger" and telephone. He seemed to be keen that I dropped off a "New Years' Day" meal for them. My husband, Tom, and I did this in the early evening. Later that evening, Andrew began to deteriorate. His girlfriend raised her concerns with us and during that call, Andrew suddenly appeared confused and then unresponsive. His girlfriend was panicking, and I told her to phone an ambulance (dialling 999), which she did immediately. At that time, I had no idea how serious this was. I had no idea that Covid could be fatal for younger people.

19. The Ambulance service call handler gave Andrew's girlfriend instructions on how to perform CPR, which she did.
20. My daughter, husband and I drove straight to their apartment and without even considering Covid we went inside to help. It is a 5-minute drive to their apartment, in the same town as us. We had cotton masks on.
21. I found Andrew and his girlfriend in their living room. Andrew's lips were blue / purple, and his eyes were half open and when Andrew's girlfriend asked me to check, I couldn't feel a pulse. I could hear the person on the phone from the emergency service guiding Andrew's girlfriend on what to do i.e. CPR. They had told her to get him off the couch and do chest compressions. I sat beside Andrew, holding his hand.
22. When the paramedics arrived, my husband directed them in. It hadn't taken them long to get there. I am sorry that I don't have exact timings for this. My husband and daughter stayed outside in the hall, and I was in the living room with Andrew and his girlfriend. The paramedics then asked us to leave the room while they worked on Andrew.
23. I stayed outside the living room door, but the door was open. They worked on him for about 20 minutes. There were several paramedics (I think four) and one doctor. The doctor managed everyone and at times asked us questions and I believe he was a critical care anaesthetist. The paramedics worked so hard, I could see them sweating as they worked in full safety gear and PPE. It looked so uncomfortable and constrictive. I was praying the whole time. I assumed that what they were doing was working. I could see the panic in my husband and daughter's face when I turned around.
24. The doctor asked us if Andrew was allergic to anything or if he had taken any medication. I told him that Andrew only had hay fever and I checked in the kitchen area and bin but found nothing. He told us that they hadn't managed to get his heart restarted and were taking him to the local hospital. He said that Andrew had

been without oxygen for a time so they weren't sure what the effect of that would be.

25. Getting him out of the apartment was a disaster. They were three floors up, and there were five medical staff (four paramedics and the doctor) trying to carry him downstairs on the board. He kept slipping off. I couldn't watch it, but my husband was trying to help.
26. They blue-lighted Andrew to the local hospital and we followed in our car. The journey took us approximately 15 minutes.
27. When we arrived at the hospital Emergency Department (2 January 2021, early hours of the morning), they took us to a family room and asked us to wait. Andrew's girlfriend's mum and sister met us there and they were taken to a separate room because they were in a different household. At that time, I truly thought they would be successful in resuscitating Andrew. Again, I have the document from the Emergency department detailing what occurred.
28. A female doctor and a senior male nurse eventually came into the family room and told us that Andrew had passed away. We were in total shock. I couldn't believe that this had happened. It felt like our world was falling apart. They told us that he had a blot clot (pulmonary embolism) caused by Covid-19 and the damage that had been done was irreversible. When I asked how this was possible, the doctor told us that she was seeing a lot of people developing blood clots. She said they had been seeing this in younger people, too. The treatment to combat these blood clots was medication like blood thinners, but she said that even if Andrew had got there earlier and was treated, it might not have been successful. We had a lot of questions for the doctor, and she took a while talking to us. She said his death would have been instant.
29. They asked if we wanted to see Andrew as we probably wouldn't get a chance to see him again due to the restrictions on visitation. I couldn't believe what we were being told. Andrew's girlfriend saw him first, and then my husband and me.

30. Andrew was lying on a trolley in A&E. He had black blotches on his skin and was bloated. His lips were dark. He was only 28. I wasn't sure if we were allowed to touch him. What a horrible thing, not being able to touch your son. I didn't know how long to stay with him, we just stood there by the trolley as there were no seats. My youngest daughter, who had also come with us to the hospital, chose not to see him.
31. When we went back to the family room, we were handed a folder with information about what to do after someone has passed away. It contained information about registering a death and making funeral arrangements. This folder was the last thing I wanted. We were not offered any mental health or counselling services.
32. The doctor and nurse did their very best. The doctor gave me her direct number and put it in the folder so I could call her with any questions I had. We were asked if we wanted a postmortem but were told the probability of it showing up anything else was very slim. The doctor told me that she would put her reputation on it being a blood clot due to Covid-19. (This is not mentioned in the report from the Emergency department). The thought of a postmortem being carried out on Andrew was horrible, so taking all of this into consideration we decided not to have one carried out.
33. In the early hours of 2 January, we left the hospital in absolute disbelief and knew then we had to phone Andrew's older brother and other younger sister who didn't live with us. We could not go and see them as they lived outside our district. We hadn't thought to contact them whilst everything was going on. We must have been in shock. My husband couldn't speak so I had to speak to them. It was horrible. I had to tell them that their brother had died. The last update that they had was that he had been feeling better. I've never had to do anything as hard as that. I felt terrible that I was giving them this shock and pain. This is something I feel so guilty about. I phoned my mum who went into total shock, and she put the phone down breaking her heart. And then I called my sister-in-law to see if they could contact my husband's family and tell them. We didn't sleep that night. We cried and felt huge panic.

34. I had further contact with the emergency department the following day. I had a lot of questions. I called the doctor who had given me her phone number and we spoke about the questions I had. I don't think she really knew what else to say. I called back a second time and another doctor answered, and after speaking for a short time, she realised that we had to isolate as we had been so close to Andrew when we were at his apartment. But at that time there was no testing available, so we just had to wait to see if we developed symptoms over the following days. I don't understand why, but we didn't develop symptoms. Andrew's funeral was arranged through online meetings and telephone calls.
35. My family and I have been impacted greatly by losing Andrew in this way. We were and still are a very close and loving family.
36. For myself, I had to leave my employment eighteen months after Andrew died. I was off work for 6 months after Andrew's death, so I needed repeat sickness notes from the GP. This was all done by phone consultations. Our local medical staff were very compassionate but sometimes I think they were so shocked and struggled with our situation. They couldn't advise us on the timing of returning to daily life / work. Once I felt I was sleeping better I considered going back to work. Looking back now I wasn't fit or ready to go back to my post of 19 years, unless truly supported. At that point I was employed for 19 years in a senior administrative position. I probably felt some pressure as my pay was due to be halved. I really was not advised or supported well enough.
37. Returning to work six months later, via a phased method, was difficult but it was a distraction for me to a certain extent. I found that I could put a face on things but on leaving work at the end of the day, I would normally breakdown in tears.
38. In August 2021 things significantly changed. It became apparent that my employer wasn't following the rules / law in respect to Covid safety of the time. A colleague was allowed to be in the workplace and move between work areas not wearing a mask. (The reality of this was an increased risk of Covid transmission). There was no exemption from mask wearing. This seemed to be a known arrangement between the colleague and management.

39. When I raised these concerns privately with management and then with my own line manager confidentiality was broken and I was made to feel like an outcast by management and some colleagues. My own line manager, however, was extremely supportive but there was only so much that she could do. As employees we were all instructed to raise health and safety concerns. My mental health began to deteriorate, and I started to have panic attacks and stop sleeping. I was prescribed medication for this anxiety. I think it was a mix of workplace induced anxiety and it was connected to the trauma from events surrounding Andrew's death. I was off work for a year in total, 6 months bereavement leave and then later another 6 months sickness leave after dealing with rule breaking and work harassment. I was not given appropriate support by senior management and emotionally unable to pursue a grievance. I requested a lateral transfer (May 2022) within my then employment and work life did feel slightly improved, although this post offered a much-reduced salary.
40. A few months later (August 2022) I decided to leave this employment and accept employment with a charity part-time. I found colleagues to be kind and compassionate. My anxieties remain but perhaps not as severe. I have lost confidence, tend to avoid social situations / celebrations, have some level of PTS, have periods of low mood / energy and poor sleep. I have engaged in four rounds of counselling to date. Grieving can be exhausting and quite often I feel a lack of hope.
41. I experience many recurring flashbacks from Andrew's death which stay with me for hours or days. These are mostly images of Andrew after he had died either in his home, in hospital or in the funeral home.
42. I can feel very envious of family and friends whose children have survived Covid. I feel ashamed about that.
43. No one has taken responsibility for Andrew's death, which is difficult for me. Covid obviously came from his girlfriend's workplace, but because their company didn't have a duty of care to him, there was nothing we could do legally. The anger that

we feel towards her employer is still with us. They didn't follow Covid Health & Safety rules and therefore put their employees and loved one's lives at risk. In my opinion her employer put profit first before their employee's safety.

44. My son's death has broken my heart, that is what it feels like. Our loss was and still is multiplied by the cause and circumstances surrounding his death. The last day that we saw Andrew alive, after dropping off shopping, he looked miserable and unwell. This image is in my head, and I will never forget it. I feel so much guilt that I did nothing to help him and so much anger for the way the NHS and our government let him down.
45. My husband, Tom, was also absent due to bereavement for 6 months. He feels a lot of guilt and anger and blames himself for being unable to protect his son. He still isn't sleeping well and suffers with periods of low mood, low self-esteem and flashbacks. He has been working from home since the very first lockdown and struggled very much with pressure in recent times to go back into the workplace. He has had to face colleagues that he hadn't seen in two years, and his confidence had been knocked. His manager was not compassionate enough and didn't understand the complexities of this bereavement, and further he seemed to put additional pressure on him.
46. Stewart, our eldest son, didn't live local to us and wasn't able to be with us during lockdowns etc., even though he wanted to and tried his very best. Stewart and his wife were able to see Andrew in the funeral home just prior to the funeral. They had to wear full PPE. Stewart broke down and this devastated him. Stewart was able to return to work sooner than we did. He continued to work from home which helped, and I feel he had a more supportive line manager / employer. He seemed to be the strongest of us at times. He stepped in to support Andrew's girlfriend with various matters e.g. arranging the return of Andrew's car, supporting her efforts to contact the local Authority Health & Safety, the HSE and a solicitor regarding a claim against her employer, but they had no success. Stewart is a very strong person, but I feel he is now very susceptible to stress.

47. Our oldest daughter, Heather, also did not live local to us during this time and moved closer to us the first chance she got. She was devastated for a long time, and I was so worried about her. She was diagnosed with depression after Andrew died and was prescribed anti-depressants in July 2021. She had also encountered problems at her work due to lack of care and compassion. A manager and some colleagues were laughing and joking about Covid on Teams calls in her presence. This was just one example.
48. She was working for a major bank in telephone banking and having to deal with other people's problems and angry customers. There was quite a lot of pressure on her to perform. While she received a good package for counselling through work (more than 30 sessions) she had to leave her employment due to the lack of understanding and compassion, and no resolution to an official grievance. She was absent from work for 18 months in total. She is unemployed now, and her husband has had to work more to make up for the financial impacts.
49. Our youngest daughter, Mhairi, had bereavement leave for many months also. She worked for a major supermarket chain and encountered some problems at work mostly due to Covid anxiety and difficulties keeping herself safe on the shop floor. Her employer deemed her leave as normal absence, which led to many absentee reviews and therefore caused her additional stress. She finally left that employment and is now self-employed. However, as she still lives in our household, we do partially support her financially as her earnings are reduced.
50. My mother suffered greatly in losing her grandson. She lived in another district so at crucial times we were all unable to offer support and care for one another. We couldn't even hug one another at Andrew's funeral. This lack of contact has had a very negative impact on us.
51. Losing Andrew in the traumatic way that we did, has left us feeling very isolated at times. Some friends and former colleagues feel gone forever. Whether they find our situation too difficult, I am not sure, but a bereavement such as this adversely affects your relationships. My husband and I are very different people now and find it extremely difficult to move forward. We still feel panic when the reality of

Andrew's death hits home, this can happen daily. This is the most frightening feeling.

Statement of Truth

I believe that the facts stated in this witness statement are true. I understand that proceedings may be brought against anyone who makes, or causes to be made, a false statement in a document verified by a statement of truth without an honest belief of its truth.

Signed: _____

Personal Data

Dated: _____

09/07/2024