

Witness Name: Seema Bhalla
Statement No: 1
Exhibits: X - X
Dated: 28 May 2024
Reference: INQ000000

UK COVID-19 INQUIRY

WITNESS STATEMENT OF SEEMA BHALLA

I, Seema Bhalla, will say as follows:

1. On 16 April 2020, my mother, Neelam Bhalla died from Covid-19 in hospital. She was 71 years old.

Background

2. In 1970, my Mum 'Matto' came to the UK from India when she was a young, newly-wed woman with my father Trilok Nath Bhalla and my 18-month-old brother Vikas Bhalla. Mum was a strong woman and as was tradition, did not go out unchaperoned prior moving to the UK, yet managed to set up her whole life here. She embraced life here with open arms and always with a smile.
3. Mum was my strength. She was more like a big sister, and even after I was married, my Mum and I remained incredibly close, almost joined at the hip. My husband and I would take her everywhere with us. My husband adored her, their bond was more like a mother and son, than son-in-law. Mum enjoyed weekend breaks away, the cinema, going out for good food and spending time with her beloved granddaughter. She loved movies: it was a joy to watch a movie with Mum, how she would laugh and laugh at the innuendos, I always saw a different side to her when we watched a movie.

Health and wellbeing

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4. Mum was fairly fit and well. She had breast cancer twice which was successfully treated and had surgery on both her spine and knee due to arthritis. These experiences never brought her down. She always had a smile on her face, never showing signs of pain. She was so very strong and positive; they were her defining characteristics.
5. Mum had arthritis and diabetes, both of which were well managed. In fact, the local doctor had asked Mum to become involved in a project where she was going to speak to other Indian people about how to control their diabetes.
6. Mum had endured some very tough personal circumstances in her life, but a year prior to her death, had gained independence, moving into assisted living accommodation. She absolutely loved it there and was thriving, almost like a totally different person – in a good way. Mum was finally happy, safe and really living life. She was incredibly social and had made countless new friends who she played games and had film nights with. It was a new lease of life for her.
7. Mum's new friendship circle meant that she was not calling upon me as much. We were not spending as much time together. She had gained her independence later in life and finally evolved, coming into her own.
8. Mum spoke and understood English fluently. However, she lip-read due to deafness in one ear and difficulty hearing in the other. When she was younger, she had an ear infection which was mismanaged, resulting in an emergency operation causing complete deafness. She needed a person to stand in front of her when communicating so that she could read their lips.

Pandemic

9. In March 2020 as the pandemic was becoming a reality, I asked mum to come and live with us as there was so much uncertainty. She said no, she was happy where she was and enjoyed the independence. Mum felt that if she left, she wouldn't know how long it would be until she could return due to the uncertainty of everything.

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10. When the UK was about to go into lockdown I again asked mum to come and live with us. Again she refused: it was an Indian thing, you wouldn't go and live with your daughters once they were married. Mum was adamant she would be fine. She was aware of the pandemic and the seriousness of the situation. Prior to the pandemic, mum had carers who would come in three times a day, sometimes more as they all loved to chat to her. As the pandemic took hold, she sometimes refused them entry to her home, as they would often arrive with little or no PPE. She even bought her own box of gloves and sanitiser and left it outside her front door for them to use.
11. On 3 April 2020, she was unwell with a urinary tract infection that needed treatment. She was taken to A&E, given oral antibiotics and discharged the same day. I saw her on 9 April 2020. Her carers normally brought her groceries, but I always brought her the Indian food that she liked that was not as easy to get hold of. I was there for five minutes, if that. I was conscious not to stay too long. I wore gloves and a mask, and I disinfected everything I touched. Mum was sitting on the bed and was perfectly well. It was the last time I saw her conscious.

13 April 2020

12. At around 10:30am on 13 April 2020, I had a call from my brother who had been contacted by the staff at mum's supported living accommodation. They reported that mum was mumbling, sweating and was incoherent. They were so worried that they called an ambulance. I joined a video call that my brother was on with the paramedics. We begged and pleaded with them not to take her to hospital. We were frightened that if she went in, she would not come out. The paramedics feared that mum had contracted sepsis and were saying that she was struggling to breathe.
13. I could see mum on the phone: she did not have breathing difficulties: she was making noises, but I knew those noises and I knew they were not a cause for concern. For 45 minutes we argued on the phone. We lost the battle and the paramedics took her to hospital where she was admitted. The paramedics told us that if we caused too much of a problem they would call the police as we were preventing them from doing their job. I knew this was the wrong decision. Little did I know it would prove to be fatal.

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14. Mum was so lucid that she asked to change her pyjamas and brush her hair before they took her in the ambulance. My brother and I asked if we could follow on but were told we could not.
15. At 13:55 on 13 April 2020, mum sent me a text message. It was in Hindi but translated read: "*Child, health is not good, could you ring India, I am so depressed, talk to you later. Love you both, Mum*".
16. She sent a later message saying "*I am scared, lonely and depressed. I won't come out of here alive*".
17. We never received the messages. They were sent from mum's phone but remained in her outbox and were undelivered. We discovered them when we received her phone back. I live every day with the pain of knowing that my mum thought I received those messages and never came to help.
18. We rang the hospital three times a day, every day, asking for updates. I asked the staff if they would help my mum to use her mobile phone so we could communicate. They said they would, but they never did. I asked if I could speak to her on the ward phone, I was told it was not possible as it was on a cord. Some staff said they were too busy and to try later, some said they had to wait till mum was awake. None of the staff helped. We never got to speak to my mum. We couldn't understand this, as the news was full of patients being offered video and facetime calls.
19. I recall that when we asked for updates we were just told mum had an extended infection and "*her sats are good*". They said she was receiving intravenous antibiotics every day. We later discovered that was not true: her medical records noted that she only received them for one day.
20. We repeatedly told staff that mum was deaf and vegetarian. Every time we said this, staff said it was not in the notes, and no one had told them.

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21. Staff then told us that she had improved and could come home on 15 April 2020. Staff told us later that she could not get out of bed unaided, so they would be keeping her in. I asked if they had considered that due to her arthritis, if she had been in bed for a couple of days, then of course she would struggle to get out of bed.
22. Staff told us they could not communicate with mum due to the language barrier. They asked if she had trouble understanding English. My mum could speak English, but she was deaf. Her hearing aids had been taken out and were on the bedside cabinet. I told the staff this. I told them that they needed to stand in front of her so she could lip-read.
23. When we reviewed mum's medical records some weeks after she had died, we were shocked that nowhere was it recorded that my mum was deaf. I could not believe the level of structural racism and assumption that had taken place, and how the medical and nursing staff had ignored what we as a family were saying about mum's means of communication.
24. I was woken by a phone call at 5:30am on 16 April 2020. A doctor from the hospital told me, "Sorry to tell you, your mum is Covid positive and has got two hours left to live". The call was clinical and lacked any empathy. This was a bombshell. The hospital was planning to discharge her the day before. No one had ever mentioned Covid to us. It was only the second phone call we had received from the hospital – all the previous communication had been initiated by the family. The previous day we were told mum's oxygen saturation level was 98%. The doctor told me on the phone that the sats had dropped to 6%. It didn't make any sense. I could not compute what the doctor was telling me.
25. The doctor told me that the family could attend the hospital to say goodbye. My husband, brother and I went to the hospital. The difference between the outside world, and inside the hospital was stark. Outside everyone was distancing, wearing masks and protecting themselves. Inside, it was like nothing had changed. There was nothing to indicate the severity of the pandemic. Very few people were wearing PPE. Staff, doctors, visitors, all walking around in groups like nothing had changed.

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26. The ward where my mother was being cared for was filthy. The staff were not wearing PPE, no one was distancing. It seemed a joke that we were asked to put on gloves, mask and plastic apron, despite no one else wearing one. The ward was mixed, with some patients who had Covid and others who did not. Two patients were diagnosed with Covid as we were in the room (the curtains were not drawn around the beds). One patient, who had agreed to participate in a clinical trial, was offered a private room, whereas my mum, who was dying, was left on the ward and had no privacy in her last hours.
27. When we saw mum, there was no sign of any treatment, she was not on a drip and her sats were not being monitored. I asked the nurse why this was, and she said, "We do not monitor DNAR patients". During one of the phone calls, staff asked my brother if we would consent to a DNACPR and he emphatically said no. He told them to do everything they could to save mum. We queried this decision on the ward and were told "*We are the medical professionals, we don't need your permission, we also do not need to discuss it with you. We are medical professionals – we will decide what is best, and a DNACPR is in your mum's best interests*". The way this was relayed to me was very cold and unfeeling. This was so final and so clinical. I think we were in shock. I was frightened. I felt that if I tried to argue or fight against this decision, then mum may not be treated well. It didn't feel like a safe environment to me. I felt intimidated.
28. Mum did not agree to a DNACPR. We now know this, as they did not speak to her at all as they wrongly assumed she could not speak English.
29. When we saw mum, there were two doctors who came to see us after we had been there for about three hours. They were the first professionals we had seen wearing PPE. It wasn't like the other PPE that they had given us to wear; it was a suit and it looked different and it looked like the two doctors had purchased the PPE themselves. They asked us who had said mum only had two hours to live, and said it was incorrect and it could be anything from two hours to two weeks. They said that if by any miracle my mum survived, she would be in a vegetative state for the rest of her life. They said that as mum's oxygen level had reduced to 6% too much damage

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had been done, and if she survived, she would likely be bed bound for the remainder of her life.

30. In the reception area of the ward there were roughly 15 nurses and doctors, all walking around with no PPE and no social distancing. There were nurses collecting Easter eggs and laughing. It is such a clear memory because I could not understand why they were acting like life was normal.
31. Mum had an oxygen mask covering her mouth and nose, making her lips really dry; I asked nurses and doctors to please moisten her lips. The doctor asked a nurse, who spoke poor English, to put a nasal oxygen tube on Mum so that her lips could be moistened. The nurse did not know how to insert the nasal oxygen tube but had taken the face oxygen mask off leaving mum gasping as she was without oxygen while the nurse fiddled around trying to insert the nasal oxygen tube. There was also a miscommunication between the doctor and the nurse which led to the same nurse giving mum water instead of moistening her lips during the oxygen mask switch.
32. I recall a nurse coming round to take blood. She asked me what I was doing on the ward and I told her that I had been informed my mum only had two hours left to live. The nurse flicked mum's arm and said, "*what am I wasting my time for here?*". This callous comment had such a profound effect on me. I felt I was unable to speak up, in case it had a detrimental effect on my mum and the treatment she would receive. I have always fought for my mum, but this time, I felt I let her down.
33. We facilitated a call with a priest to perform mum's final rites over a video call and we called my father in India. It was a video call and his sister was with him. She is a nurse and she said that mum looked good, she had colour in her face and did not look like she was dying.
34. After six hours at mum's bedside, we left to go home, with the intent of coming back later. We went home to let other family members know what was happening.
35. I called the hospital at 18:30 to ask how mum was and staff said she was the same.

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Lack of bereavement support

36. At 21:30, staff called me to say she had died. I was in such shock that I could not drive. We could not get a taxi. No bereavement support was offered, it was not suggested that I could come the following day – nothing.
37. I don't know how mum caught Covid, but I suspect it was when she went into hospital the first time to get oral antibiotics. Infection prevention and control was poor, both from carers and particularly at the hospital. How did my mum go from having a simple urine infection to dying a few days later? Why did the hospital give up on her and write her off? My mum deserved more.
38. We were not allowed to bring mum's body home. We were told her body would be placed in a bag and we should arrange an undertaker.
39. I went back to the hospital a few days later to collect mum's belongings. I was met by the same nurse who had flicked my mum's arm as she lay unconscious. She said "Hi" to me, but I could not bring myself to respond. She called me rude and proceeded to talk to the other nurses about me. The lack of care or understanding about the grief process was astounding. They brought me some belongings that were not my mother's. They eventually brought another two sets of belongings forward. One set was mum's, and I took them home.
40. Arranging the funeral was a dreadful experience with an undertaker who promised me we would be able to wash and dress mum. I set about buying clothes online. In Indian culture, if you die a married woman, you are cremated as a married woman. It was important she had the right clothes. He promised I could dress her and suggested I buy clothes that were a bit bigger, with elasticated waists as mum's body was now quite swollen. The undertaker kept us hanging for ten days and then sent a snappy text that said we could not wash her, her body had to stay in the bag.
41. My brother then found a different undertaker who really seemed like he cared; I offered to pay for PPE, sterilisation, anything; just so I could see my mum. He was kind and he said to me that I would not want to see her, not now after all the time that

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had passed. I will be forever grateful for his kindness. I could not accept that it was my mum that they had, I had not been able to say goodbye. She had died alone, having sent text messages that we never received. I was in such a state of distress.

42. One of the undertaker's staff offered to retrieve the stud earrings mum had been wearing so I could know for sure it was definitely my mum. This act of kindness helped and gave me some reassurance.
43. The second undertaker was the kind of person who really understood and helped. He asked me to write down very precise instructions about the sari and how to dress mum. I will never know if it was done, but I like to believe that it was.
44. There were 10 people at the funeral which lasted around 20 minutes. That was the representation of her life. My neighbours all stood at their front doors. That was not the send-off my mother should have had. For the next few weeks, I received many phone calls as people could not come around to offer condolences. We could not grieve properly, and did not believe she was gone. We had planned to go to India, there were so many plans.
45. It's not just losing my mum, but the way she was treated in the hospital has had a serious impact on me. I don't switch off. I can't. Whenever I close my eyes at night, I see my mum lying in the hospital bed and cry myself to sleep. If mum had not gone in that ambulance, she probably would still be alive. If she had not gone for antibiotics, if there had been better systems in place for delivery of medications, she would not have been exposed to Covid.
46. I was so profoundly devastated that I didn't think I could carry on. My husband has been the one who has had to save me.
47. My mum, Neelam Bhalla was amazing; she was everything and more. She deserved more. Not only did I lose my mum that day, I lost my best friend - she was my everything. Since then, our lives have not been the same, I have not been the same - I am a shadow of who I was. My mum always said that I was her strength - but since she has gone, I have realised that she was my strength.

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48. I believe that the NHS let down my mum, and the NHS let us down too. She is not a statistic of a person who died of Covid. She is much more than that. The NHS denied her the right to communicate, and needlessly exposed her to Covid. Why? Because she was over 65? Came from assisted living? Could not hear? Had medical conditions or was it because she was of Indian origin?

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: ____25/06/2024____