Witness Name: Jane Wier-Wierzbowska

Statement No.: 1

Exhibits: 0

Dated: 3rd May 2025

UK COVID-19 INQUIRY - MODULE 6

WITNESS STATEMENT OF JANE WIER-WIERZBOWSKA

I, **Jane Wier-Wierzbowska**, c/o Broudie Jackson Canter Solicitors will say as follows: -

1. I am a member of CBFFJ UK and make this statement in relation to Module 6, the impact of the pandemic on the Care Sector, in response to the UK Covid -19 Inquiry's Request for Evidence under Rule 9 of the Inquiry Rules 2006.

Introduction

2. My mother, Patricia Smalley, died on 27 January 2021 aged 91 while resident at a care home. My mother was strong and resilient, a devoted wife to my dad and a devoted mother to myself and my younger brother. Our early life was filled with love and happiness and throughout our lives our mum and dad were always there for us. Mum was at the centre of family life, her energy and passion driving her to be very house proud, our homes and gardens were always lovingly tended and immaculate.

3. Mum was fit and healthy and had always been active, enjoying swimming, fencing, archery, and in later life, tennis, badminton and yoga. In her early years she worked as a hairdresser. Following a break to raise me and my brother, she later had a number of jobs, her last working for the NHS as a clerk on a children's ward.

4. My father died in 2010, and shortly after, mum decided to move closer to me. We looked at lots of places and happily decided on sheltered accommodation just a mile

away from us. It was wonderful to have her so close. She was still very independent and loved her new home with its community spirit. Mum hugely enjoyed being around nature; we would regularly visit National Trust gardens, open gardens and animal sanctuaries.

5. In 2012 we noticed that mum's memory was not as sharp as it had once been. When she saw a specialist, she was diagnosed with Alzheimer's. The progression of the disease was slow, and she continued to enjoy life to the full. To those who didn't know her, it would have been hard to spot. In 2014 I took the decision to go part time in my teaching job and then, in 2017, I retired. I am so thankful I made these choices as I got to spend what I now know to be incredibly precious time with my mum. We went out every day and I firmly believe that the time we spent together, doing the things we loved, helped to significantly limit the progress of her Alzheimer's.

6. On 1st December 2019 my mum suffered a terrible stroke. Mum was taken to hospital and initially it appeared a very poor prognosis. We were devastated. The hospital persuaded the family that a DNACPR was appropriate. However, mum was very resilient, as I knew she would be, and made progress. Although she was immobilised, she was still able to talk clearly and had use of her right hand side.

7. I spent as much time as was allowed every day at the hospital with mum. My brother, who prior to mum's stroke had already been concerned about the toll this was taking on me, persuaded me we should look for a care home, and we found one that was as close to my home as the sheltered accommodation. Mum moved to the care home on 23rd December 2019, sooner than I'd originally hoped. She had a lovely room on the ground floor with patio windows on to a courtyard. We placed a bird table and a pot of plants outside the doors so she could continue to enjoy nature.

8. I visited mum every single day from around 10:00 in the morning until about 8:00 at night. Mum made really good progress and we hired a physiotherapist who was confident about the prospect of mum using her leg again. Following her advice I exercised mum's leg every day. Mum was not completely bed bound, and after the first few days she was able to be moved into a chair which she could be moved around in. She was still very articulate and communicative.

9. I was spending every day in the care home and built up some excellent relationships with the staff, particularly the receptionist. They were very kind and accommodating. At this point I don't think I really noticed their approach to PPE and IPC.

The Pandemic

10. As we entered 2020, I began to hear about the pandemic. I was very busy caring for mum, and I don't recall exactly when I became acutely aware of the gravity of the situation. I recall being aware of advice to wash my hands more frequently. I remember asking the receptionist if they had enough PPE as it was in the news. She told me that as they were a large company, they had plenty.

Lockdown of the Care Home

11. I was still visiting mum every single day when the manager approached me on the 17th of March and told me they were going to lock down the care home. I remember being initially completely shocked and then utterly distraught. It was such a sudden decision, with no warning. I had to try and say goodbye to my mum that day, not knowing when I would be able to have any physical contact again. It turned out to be never.

12. The home initially permitted window visits and I continued to visit mum every day. I would stand outside a closed communal lounge patio door which mum would be sitting close to. Mum couldn't hear me so I would print off large cards telling her I loved her – that I would hold up outside. I did this every day for as long as I was allowed.

13. On 27th March it was confirmed via email that the window visits had to stop. This was because they wanted to ring fence the outside space for residents who wanted to use the garden, and they needed to keep them safe. I was so frustrated and upset by this. The care home was a large, older building, once a domestic property that had seen a series of extensions and adaptations. It had large grounds and at least 3 distinct outdoor spaces. I was of the view that they could allow window visits to continue if they chose a specified area for the residents. I was treading on eggshells though, I wanted them to allow my requests, and so I didn't want to push back or

argue with them too much, in case I was seen as difficult, or they started to say no. It is now a source of great regret that I did not push harder.

14. My contact with my mum was reduced to daily telephone calls at 7pm. When the home could facilitate it, I would also be allowed a Skype call. These were a complete lottery as to when the home could provide them. I would ring up every day to try and get a slot. There was no regularity in terms of availability or how long they would last. As my mum only had one functioning arm, she always had to have someone with her to help with the device, so there was a complete lack of privacy. My mum would often ask, 'When am I going to see you?' and I would have to explain why I wasn't allowed in. My mum didn't understand and was confused and, at times, distressed, and it became increasingly hard for her to understand why we could not truly be with her and have any physical contact. These calls were really difficult. I tried so hard to be bright and cheery so that I did not upset her. As soon as the call ended, I would often break down, it was incredibly mentally challenging.

15. Over the next few months, I still had no physical contact with my mum. My daily phone calls continued, and I badgered the home every day to get whatever else they could offer, whether that was Skype or open lounge door or garden visits when they intermittently allowed them. These began around mid-June but were stopped again in September, following the first suspected Covid case in the home. They resumed visits for a short time in October before being stopped again. There was a long table in the garden or outside the open lounge patio doors and you could sit 2 metres away from your loved one. This was not easy for mum as she felt the cold and often these short visits would be interrupted by finding someone to bring clothes or a blanket for her to stay warm.

16. I had been concerned about mum's isolation within the home and asked if she was being taken to the communal areas, such as the lounge, and they said that she was. There were occasions though, such as an afternoon Skype call when I saw she was still in bed, and I found the fact she was alone with no stimulation very distressing. The care home had a capacity of around 80 and I think there were about 60+ residents when it locked down.

17. I cannot really comment on the IPC and testing within the home, I had no visibility of it as it locked down so early. I am aware that testing was taking place and that on an occasion when my mum needed outside medical care, that was arranged with the local Rapid Response Team (an urgent care service specialising in management of acute illnesses in adults in the community working to prevent unnecessary admission to acute hospitals), and she was seen within the care home setting. I am also aware of standard blue mask wearing by observing staff on my Skype calls and restricted visits.

18. By November 2020 I was still spending every day trying to see my mum by whatever means possible. The care home began pod visits. They first had one and then two purpose-built spaces within the home, one was an old library, and one was an old bedroom. There was a floor to ceiling Perspex screen dividing the room and a sound system to enhance communication. There was a separate external entrance to each. They offered one half hour visit per week, but I would phone every morning to check availability and, as far as I am aware, they allowed me to fill any gap they had. My mum would often look at me through the screen, beckon me and say, “Just come through”. It was heartbreaking not to be able to touch her and hold her and be able to explain what was happening. I could see an escalation of her deterioration. One day as she was talking to me, a carer approached her from behind and just started to pull her away backwards, signalling the end of the visit. She did not know what was happening and the fear in her eyes was palpable.

19. The impact of isolation and loneliness on dementia sufferers was well recognised and well documented including by Healthwatch who highlighted the significant and widespread deterioration of care home residents and grief for families, but it wasn’t until mid-November that I was given any hope of physical visits when the Government began a trial where tested, named, visitors were allowed into care homes. I understand that a wider roll-out of the scheme was planned in December and my hopes were raised of being able to actually be with mum at Christmas. This was published In Government Guidance for the Christmas Period on 29th November, but tragically this never happened for us. Guidance meant care homes were free to make their own decisions. I had to continue to watch my mum’s decline through a screen, something that was, and still is, so deeply distressing.

Contracting Covid

20. My mum contracted Covid during the second outbreak at the care home. This was in January 2021. She showed no visible signs and appeared to be largely asymptomatic. Her mental health had already declined significantly due to lack of contact with her loved ones, the impact of isolation had been so incredibly detrimental. She hadn't been eating or drinking well and mum simply didn't have the physical or mental strength left to combat the virus. I was told that she was being kept comfortable but, of course, the greatest comfort to her was denied as I was not allowed to be with her.

21. I asked to be able to see my mum, but they refused. It had been 10 months, since I last had physical contact and now, she was gravely ill. In the last few days of her life, I was allowed to be outside the patio door to her room and the staff wheeled her bed closer to me. I stayed there for hours each day in the freezing cold, rain, and snow. One day I asked mum if she would like me to build her a snowman. She said yes and I now deeply regret not doing that for her, but I thought I would get too cold to be able to stay there with her. My husband wasn't allowed to be outside with me; he would often sit in the car and wait for me. I took a chair, my phone and a hot drink and I stayed there each day, for as long as I could, until it was dark, or they told me to leave.

22. They facilitated phone calls with my mum during my outdoor visits. As she now had the virus, the phone was in a plastic bag on her shoulder. There was no one in the room to help her. I cannot imagine how this must have seemed to her, but it was utterly harrowing for me.

23. The home permitted me some indoor visits in the last 48 hours of mum's life. Again, I was not allowed to have anyone with me, not even when she passed away. The cruelty of that situation is not lost on me. What difference would it have made to allow my husband to enter at that time? So often the rules around care homes felt like a postcode lottery. Even local and national government was not aligned – my area was tier 1 in October which meant that government advice was for restricted visits to take place, but the local authority advised suspending them and the latter was the advice the care home decided to follow.

End of Life Care

24. At the end of my mum's life, I was in PPE: a standard face mask, a plastic apron and gloves. Since mum tested positive, I think the nurses were in the same PPE as I was asked to wear. There were modifications to her room, such as extra bins which gave a more clinical appearance. My mum could see this, and it terrified her. At one point before I was allowed either outdoor or end of life visits, she asked me on the phone, "Is this it?". I had to try and keep my composure and try to comfort her, it was horrific. I had always been her advocate, in control of her medication, supporting her, looking after her – but that had been ripped away from me. I couldn't even hold her hand or hug her. I was a metre away from her at the end of the bed. The nurses were often not in the room, but I was too afraid to break any rule. I shall forever live with the wish that I had just ignored the rules and held her hand, given her one last physical offering of comfort. But I didn't. I kept to the rules, so fearful I would be ejected if I didn't.

25. My mum eventually lost consciousness and passed away. I was able to stay awhile with her. Alone. Not able to touch her even then.

26. I had been kept from my mum for her last 10 months being told it was to protect her from Covid and yet this is what took her life. My mum had always been such a strong and resilient woman, and I firmly believe that if I had been able to visit her, we would not have seen such a decline, and she would have shown her usual grit and determination to fight Covid. I will never know this for certain, of course, but what I do know is that she would have had a quality of life in her last year that was denied her. I also know that I would not be feeling traumatised because my mum thought I was choosing not to be with her. I would not be feeling, or rather knowing, that my absence contributed significantly to my mum's decline and death.

27. My mum had paid for a funeral plan; however, the provider was unable to allow visits. By this point, I was so angry and upset; I was not prepared to accept no for an answer any longer. The funeral director was very helpful and advised me of some independent funeral homes, who would facilitate a visit. So even then, I couldn't fulfil my mum's wishes and had to pay for a separate arrangement, with additional transport and costs. But it meant I got to see my mum. At first, they told me there

would be a thin veil of gauze between me and my mum and I, devastated and furious, said I couldn't have any more barriers, however small, between us. To their credit, they understood, they removed it, and I was finally allowed to sit with my mum and touch her. I did this every day until they gently told me it wouldn't be right for me to come any more. I sat with her, and I cried, and I said I was sorry and that I wished, how I wished, I had been braver for her. Like thousands of others, we then had a restricted funeral with only 27 guests and distancing between mourners so there were no comforting hugs or anything else that goes with a shared grief and there could be no wake to celebrate the life of my wonderful mum. No one understood just how critical these post death rituals are.

28. My close friend of 36 years lost her mum to Covid in a care home just 7 weeks before I lost my mum. We felt isolated and alone in our fight for justice and truth before we joined CBFFJ UK. The group has provided us, and so many others, with comfort and empowerment. None of this, the Inquiry, the Memorial Wall, the togetherness, would exist without the dedication and grit of people who came together and managed to find some light in the darkest of places.

29. I don't know where I have found the strength to engage in extensive campaign work, it does not come naturally to me, but it has become my voice. I began after discovering One Dementia Voice, a collaboration of dementia organisations who wrote to Matt Hancock in July 2020. Their letter included highlighting the 52% excess dementia deaths which were non-coronavirus-related in the first three months of lockdown. They called for the Government to grant a family or friend carer 'Key Worker Status', which would allow them to meet the essential needs of their loved ones in recognition of the damage separation has on those with dementia. Hearing the voices of experts empowered me and I wrote to Boris Johnson, Matt Hancock, and my own MP imploring them to act. I spoke on my regional BBC television station and the Today programme. I have since written many more letters and have featured in the media. I had read about Amnesty International raising the Human Rights abuse that dementia sufferers were experiencing, and it propelled me to do more. Alongside supporting CBFFJ, I campaign with Care Rights UK and have recently spoken at the National Care Forum Managers Conference where I campaigned for the legal right to a care supporter, something I shall continue to campaign for until this becomes law. A care supporter is so much more than a visitor; they are an advocate and the eyes,

ears and memory of their loved one. The elderly are not a homogenous group and the needs of those with dementia need to be taken into account.

Long term impact

30. This is an open-ended trauma, a wound that won't close. Guilt that won't abate. My mum was the most resilient of women, I firmly believe that had I been able to visit her, the decline would not have been so rapid, and she would have shown her usual strength and determination to fight the virus. But there was nothing left of her to do so. She was denied the quality of life that she should have had in her final year. Worse still, she thought that I had chosen not to be with her. She was lonely and depressed, and it breaks my heart. Had the government listened to the dementia experts, had I been given key worker status and allowed to visit, I know the mental and physical toll on her health would have been lessened. I would not be suffering the trauma, pain and guilt that will stay with me forever. After everything she'd done for me - at the time my mum needed me the most I wasn't there for her. I have to live in hope that no loved one ever has to suffer in this way again. By listening to my experience and the experience of so many like me and by heeding the words of experts, solutions could have and should have been found during the pandemic. If we don't learn lessons now history will repeat itself.

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: 3rd May 2025