Letter to the Editor

Dear Editor

Before the new Smoking Ban took effect on 1.7.07 the Trust informed its employees that smoking on Trust premises would become illegal on that day. The message that Trust employees were duty bound to challenge those smoking and to ask them to desist has since been re-inforced. The Trust policy is clearly failing at the RLI: smokers are only too obvious by their presence outside Centenary Main Entrance and the Women's Unit at all times of the day and night, enhancing the Trust reputation as somewhere where smoking is more tolerated than in a pub, for instance. The nurses even wheel patients (presumably including amputees) down to Centenary Main Entrance and tell them to smoke there. On last Tuesday evening at 18.15 there were 8 smokers and a horrifying cloud of smoke right by the door, next to the No Smoking notices.

Mindful of my obligation to actually do something, as opposed to just carping on the sidelines, I resolved to confront the ill-doers in a firm but non-confrontational manner. This is the result of this selfless action on 3 consecutive mornings:

Day 1 in the UHMBNHST House: 2 female smokers in dressing gowns sat on the wall to the left of Centenary Main Entrance with their drip stands and infusion pumps. They just ignored my entreaties and carrried on smoking.

Day 2: 1 female smoker in pink dressing gown in the same place, with the No Smoking notice right by her left ear. After telling me that the ward nurse had brought her there and said she could smoke, "so it must be alright", she went into the usual rigmarole about the No Smoking notice only forbidding smoking inside the hospital and then told me to "**** off".

Day 3: 1 female smoker in a wheelchair and 2 males sitting on the wall, only yesterday. The central and main character, heavily tattooed on the knuckles of both hands replied, "I will smoke here when I like, and nobody will stop me. These bins are made for smokers (he's right about that – they obviously are) so the hospital must want us to smoke here. I'll be here smoking every hour if you want to come and see me".

I was wrong; the Trust Anti-Smoking policy is not failing through Lack of Interest. It has failed. In protest, I wrote to all the consultants who had previously been enjoined to support this Trust policy, but who had regrettably not been supported in this endeavour by the Trust.

I was surprised by the small torrent of support I instantly received: one consultant had seen an ambulanceman ask someone at Centenary entrance to stop smoking and receive a tirade of swearing in return – he had the knuckle tattoos, so was probably the same man savouring his ability to abuse Trust staff with impunity; others were intimidated by the hordes of smokers prowling the entrances to Trust hospitals and were reluctant to accost them, choosing instead to breath-hold and hurry past. One female paediatrician, not unduly tall, felt threatened herself by the smokers outside Women's Block and pointed out that staff there had to shut the windows to prevent ingress of the clouds of secondhand smoke into the Neonatal Unit and other wards and offices. She also regretted the effects on, and the message to the children forced to endure the RLI simulation of a gas attack on the Western Front on their way to and from Children's OPD.

The failure will continue while the Trust fears to offend smokers, and permits them to break the law. At the very least it should announce that it does not intend to enforce the law, isolate the smokers somewhere less likely to damage others, and cease urging diminutive females and ageing infirm doctors like myself to shoulder a burden so determinedly shirked by the Trust itself. Better by far, the Trust could prove me wrong and pursue a prosecution, as opposed to risking one by permitting the smoking to continue. That's what they do with recalcitrant pub landlords, isn't it?

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