

Scottish Child Abuse Inquiry

Witness Statement of

Elizabeth AITKEN

Support person present: Yes

1. My name is Elizabeth Aitken. My date of birth is [REDACTED] 1918. My contact details are known to the Inquiry.

Background

2. In 1939 I became a state registered nurse. Along with a couple of other nurses, I contracted diphtheria and I was advised not to start my general training. I was a state registered fever nurse. In those days you had fever hospitals and general hospitals. They were kept separate. There was no National Health Service. They were normally run by the local authorities.
3. I took a staff nurse job at Roadmeetings Hospital in Carluke, which was a fever hospital. I was there for about five years then moved on to Dumfries & Galloway Infirmary. I believe Roadmeetings is a care home now. It's up on a hill. It covered the whole of Lanarkshire for scarlet fever and tuberculosis. When children had measles and things like that they were just kept at home.
4. Roadmeeting had two large wards, one for females and one for males and the sanatorium at the top of the hill. The children mixed with the adults. You worked on every ward there, wherever you were needed.

Smyllum Orphanage

5. Some of the children we got at the hospital came from Smyllum Orphanage. It had its own little hospital where they could treat children when they had ring worm, impetigo and that sort of thing, which were rife in those days, however they would come to us with notifiable diseases.
6. When you attended Smyllum to collect a child you were allowed into the entrance but that's as far as you got. I would say they didn't want you to know what went on. It was a closed order, they didn't want people to know what was going on.
7. I can still picture the entrance hall at Smyllum, it was quite big. It was situated in the High Street in Lanark. It was quite a large building. The entrance hall was tiled. I couldn't tell you where their own hospital was in the building.
8. The incubation period for scarlet fever was ten to fifteen days. Once the rash had cleared and the skin had peeled off they were given a special bath. They'd be in hospital for a total of three weeks. The ambulance man then took them back to the home.
9. I don't remember if any of the nuns had scarlet fever. They wouldn't have come to us. They would have kept them in their own hospital, although Roadmeetings Hospital was for children and adults.
10. I can't say I'm aware of any of the children from Smyllum dying while they were in the hospital. If someone died of a notifiable disease someone would have to be told. The procurator fiscal I think. But I don't think they had to notify the hospital.
11. I never met a doctor at Smyllum. I expect it would be a doctor from the town. I never met the doctor. Nurses didn't speak to the doctors then. Everything would go through the ward sister, who would then speak to the doctor. It wasn't the same person who collected the child that took them back, it was whoever was on duty.

12. Normally when we went to collect someone with scarlet fever there was a man came with you in the ambulance and you took the patient out and he would disinfect the house. When you went to Smyllum to pick children up they'd only let him into the entrance hall to disinfect. This was defeating the purpose because it wasn't disinfecting the whole place. He burnt a pellet of some kind to disinfect the place, if my memory serves me correctly. I don't know if the ambulance man reported the fact that he only disinfected the hall. I didn't report it. I never thought anything about it at the time.
13. I couldn't say a child from Smyllum had been abused because I didn't see a child being abused, but they weren't like normal children. While other children would be running about playing after recovering from scarlet fever, the Smyllum children just sat beside their bed, as if they were frightened. They were very subdued children.
14. This was during the war of course, so there was rationing. I couldn't say the children were undernourished. If someone was admitted to Roadmeetings they had to be referred by their doctor, who would contact the hospital and say there was an outbreak of scarlet fever. I can't recall any of the doctors' names. I don't think their hospital was run by registered nurses. It was run by the nuns, but I don't know if they were nurses.
15. I couldn't say how many children were admitted from Smyllum but there was only ever one child at any one time over intervals, not groups of children in my memory. I think they were diagnosed quite quickly because having had it myself when I was eighteen the rash spreads quite quickly. They would have a high fever for a short time then the skin started peeling.
16. You would get an outburst of scarlet fever. You might go quite a long time without having to go to Smyllum. We also dealt with tuberculosis and diphtheria at the hospital. Smyllum looked after their own in terms of measles and tuberculosis, etc. We only got their children for notifiable diseases.

17. When you went to collect a child you normally went to where he or she was but they brought the child to you. One of the nuns would bring the child down wrapped in a blanket or something like that. There was no affection shown by the nuns. They were very strict. The children were seen but not heard.
18. The children never spoke to me. There was never any close contact. They were very quiet. They weren't like normal children, who would play around after recovering from the disease. We didn't think anything about this, we just thought this was their way of life. I can't remember the names of any of the children. It's seventy odd years ago.
19. The children were from about three years old and upwards. They were such quiet children. They didn't respond to you. When we washed them they didn't respond to you talking to them. I can't remember them laughing at all. I never thought anything of it at the time. I just thought that was how the children were.
20. They couldn't play with other children. I always thought it was a sad life. I don't think they knew how to play because nobody played with them. You just looked after them and sent them back to the home.
21. Some of them weren't very healthy. They would have ring worm or impetigo, these infectious diseases, but these would be dealt with in their own hospital. Their immune system wasn't very good, that's why they kept getting recurring attacks of ring worm, etc. They wouldn't if they were of good health.

Bedwetting

22. If a child wet the bed in hospital, we just changed the bed and gave them a fresh mattress. I don't know what happened in Smyllum. We didn't punish a child for bedwetting at all. They couldn't help wetting their beds. If there were very young children, you'd put nappies on them.

23. The children from Smyllum acted differently to others when they wet their bed. They sat quietly like they were trying to hide the fact they had wet the bed. Knowing what I know now, I think they thought they'd be punished for wetting the bed. When they wet the beds their sheets and mattresses were changed and then the child would get a rubber mat under the sheet.

Bathing

24. They would also get washed with warm water and a sponge or cloth. If there was no disinfectant you used soap. There was a jelly soap that you took out of a tin and put it into the water, which made the suds.
25. We might have used carbolic soap to wash our hands. We would never use it on the children. In those days people did use carbolic soap to wash because it was a disinfectant as far as they were concerned.
26. One treatment I knew that happened to the children from Smyllum was they were put into cold baths for misbehaving. I can't remember how I know that, whether someone told me or what. The children didn't say anything. They were quiet children.
27. I can't recall if the children from Smyllum wore clothes that were any different from other children. The clothes they had been wearing would be disinfected, they wouldn't have been destroyed.
28. Visitors only got to come to the window. Parents of children would come to the window and the children would go over and do a sort of sign language to communicate. The Smyllum children never got any visitors.
29. The children had their charts that hung from their bed. I don't know what happened to these records when the children went back to Smyllum. I think they would have stayed at the hospital.

30. I saw an article in the Sunday Post about the children from Smyllum in the huge grave and thought about the time I worked with the children there.

Other information

31. I have no objection to my witness statement being published as part of the evidence to the Inquiry. I believe the facts stated in this witness statement are true.

Signed..... 

Dated..... *10-10-2017*