

Elena's story: Fighting to be heard

With asylum seekers and refugees continuing to face challenges in the UK, we hear from Elena* about her fight to get the healthcare help she needed.

***name changed**



Navigating a new country with little knowledge of how services work can be challenging and having little control over where you live means healthcare can become a postcode lottery.

Elena's story demonstrates how inconsistent the quality of NHS healthcare can be and the real impact that poor care can have on people's lives. Her experiences show why it is so important that

healthcare professionals listen to their patients and that good care is available to everyone, no matter where they live.

Elena's journey

When Elena first came to England * years ago, she and her family were placed in a hostel in the Midlands. Having moved to Rotherham in *, Elena's initial experience of accessing healthcare was very positive:

"We registered with [a] medical centre, they were so good! Amazing staff. They were very good at communicating with me, they seemed to really care. I'm scared of needles, but they were so kind and gave me plenty of time during my appointments. My mental health wasn't great [at the time] and I spoke a few times with a lady...who was fantastic with me, she really showed a lot of care for me"

However, having moved house, Elena and her family had to register with a new GP surgery that was closer to their new home. Unfortunately, the treatment that she received from her new surgery was an entirely different experience.

The struggle to be heard

For the past 4 years, Elena has suffered from continuous water infections that leave her distressed and in "awful pain". Despite

repeated contact with her GP practice, Elena feels that she isn't taken seriously and the staff there don't listen to her. She told us:

“The staff on reception that you speak to on the phone and when you go in are rude. When I've called my surgery about the infections, they just tell me to go to the pharmacy. I don't want to go to the pharmacy for them to cover up my problem with antibiotics. I want to know why I keep getting the infections so often! I've been begging for scans and my problem to be looked into. They just don't listen to me”

The antibiotics that Elena has repeatedly been given, have caused her further problems due to their side effects. When she has tried to raise her issues with her surgery she has just been accused of being rude. Elena feels she has been treated differently to English patients in her surgery and has noticed how staff smile and respond in a friendlier way to them than they do to other nationalities. Elena speaks of having to adjust her behaviour to try to get the treatment she needs.

“I have to change how I speak to health care workers. If I use better words and choose them carefully I feel they may listen more, but why do I have to try to be someone else?”

Having found that she felt more comfortable talking to certain doctors at her surgery, Elena tried to request appointments with them. Although patients don't have the right to see a specific doctor, surgeries should make reasonable efforts to accommodate requests. In Elena's case, her requests were ignored and she was forced to see lots of different doctors which she felt didn't help her situation.

The impact on her life

The lack of help Elena has experienced over the past 4 years has had a profound effect on her life.

Continuous flare ups have forced her to take time off work to sort out her health, and recently she felt she had no choice but to leave her job. Her everyday life has been impacted through the pain she has endured. Struggling to sleep or even unable to cuddle her little brother, Elena's mental health has suffered. On her worst days, Elena confesses she feels that she'd "rather be dead than in this pain".

I shouldn't have to beg

Elena's story is one of frustration and disappointment. Healthcare services that should have been there to help her, failed to listen and take swift enough action. Thankfully, Elena has finally been given a scan and been referred for further investigation but in her words...

"I just would like people to try to understand me and give me a bit more time.

I sometimes feel judged.

I want them to take action.

I shouldn't have to beg to be helped"

It doesn't seem too much to ask does it?

It's not just Elena...

Across the country we hear that when people from ethnic minority groups use primary care services, they often face unfair, disrespectful or rude treatment. Staff may also not listen to patients. Unconscious (or conscious) bias can lead to patients not being taken seriously and pain being dismissed. This means they aren't offered the right treatments such as in Elena's case.

In England and Wales, the 2021 census shows that **25.7%** of the population are from ethnic minority groups. In Rotherham, **9%** of the population fall into this group. Although our local figures are lower than the national statistics, we know that these groups still face inequalities when they try to access healthcare.

Those who have arrived here as refugees or asylum seekers are often subject to even further challenges. Between April to June 2024, there were **674** supported asylum seekers living in Rotherham. Additionally, **15** unaccompanied asylum seeking children were transferred into the borough over the last 12 months. Rotherham has also seen **44** refugees resettled here since 2014.

What's your story?

Over 6.5 million people are waiting for a test, treatment or operation.

Because of the stories people have shared with us, we [have called on the NHS](#) to do more to support people while they wait, including help with managing pain and their mental health.

But what more can the NHS do to support you if you are on a waiting list? Or is your local NHS helping you in a way that other services could learn from?

[Tell us your care experiences](#)