

Gazette

COMMENT

Statutory inquiry into deaths is essential

YOU can't seem to be able to throw a stone without hitting an inquiry. There are inquiries into the government's handling of the pandemic, inquiries into the emergency services response to the Manchester Bombing and the terror attack on London Bridge.

Inquiries into, well, all manner of subjects.

And it does feel, at times, like there is a lot of retrospective analysis at the expense of forward planning.

But the truth is the two go hand in hand.

We can learn from history. We can look at what was done before and make sure any mistakes are not repeated.

There is, without doubt, a need for a statutory inquiry into the deaths of mental health inpatients in Essex over a 21-year period.

An initial figure of 1,500 deaths based on information from the Essex Partnership NHS Trust was announced in March 2022.

They all died while they were patients on a mental health ward in Essex, or within three months of being discharged, between 2000 and 2020.

By January, the number of deaths under investigation is now closer to 2,000.

Something has gone badly wrong. At the moment, the Essex Mental Health Independent inquiry is not a statutory one meaning staff cannot be forced to give evidence.

And so far, out of 14,000 current and former EPUT staff, just 11 have agreed to give evidence.

How can the truth be told with such a response?

This is not about blame, although there may be an element of that. It is about giving the relatives the truth and making sure any mistakes are not repeated.

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'Running to put right worst year of my life'

Problems resurfaced years after Pete buried the traumas... now he wants to help others

by **LEWIS ADAMS**
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WHEN Pete Whitwell was being treated in intensive care, it felt like he'd had his fair share of hard luck.

The 21-year-old's parents had been warned he had a 50/50 chance of making it through as pancreatitis left him on the brink.

But when his dad was sent to prison and his mum suddenly died of cancer a short while into his sentence, it was the culmination of a relentless year of devastating news.

They are two defining points in his life he hadn't even discussed with his closest friends.

But when 14 years of buried grief and trauma came to a head at the end of last year, the now 35-year-old decided enough was enough.

"Every single thing I thought I had dealt with had just been laying dormant and it hit me all at once," said Pete, who lives in Kelvedon.

"But now I can help other people by sharing my story."

It is why he is lacing up to take on a gruelling fundraiser while using his own experiences to encourage other people to seek support. He explained life always has something around the corner and anyone can suddenly be battling their own demons.

After all, things were then looking up for 21-year-old Pete as he returned to his pals on campus to continue with his studies in 2009 after recovering from his illness.

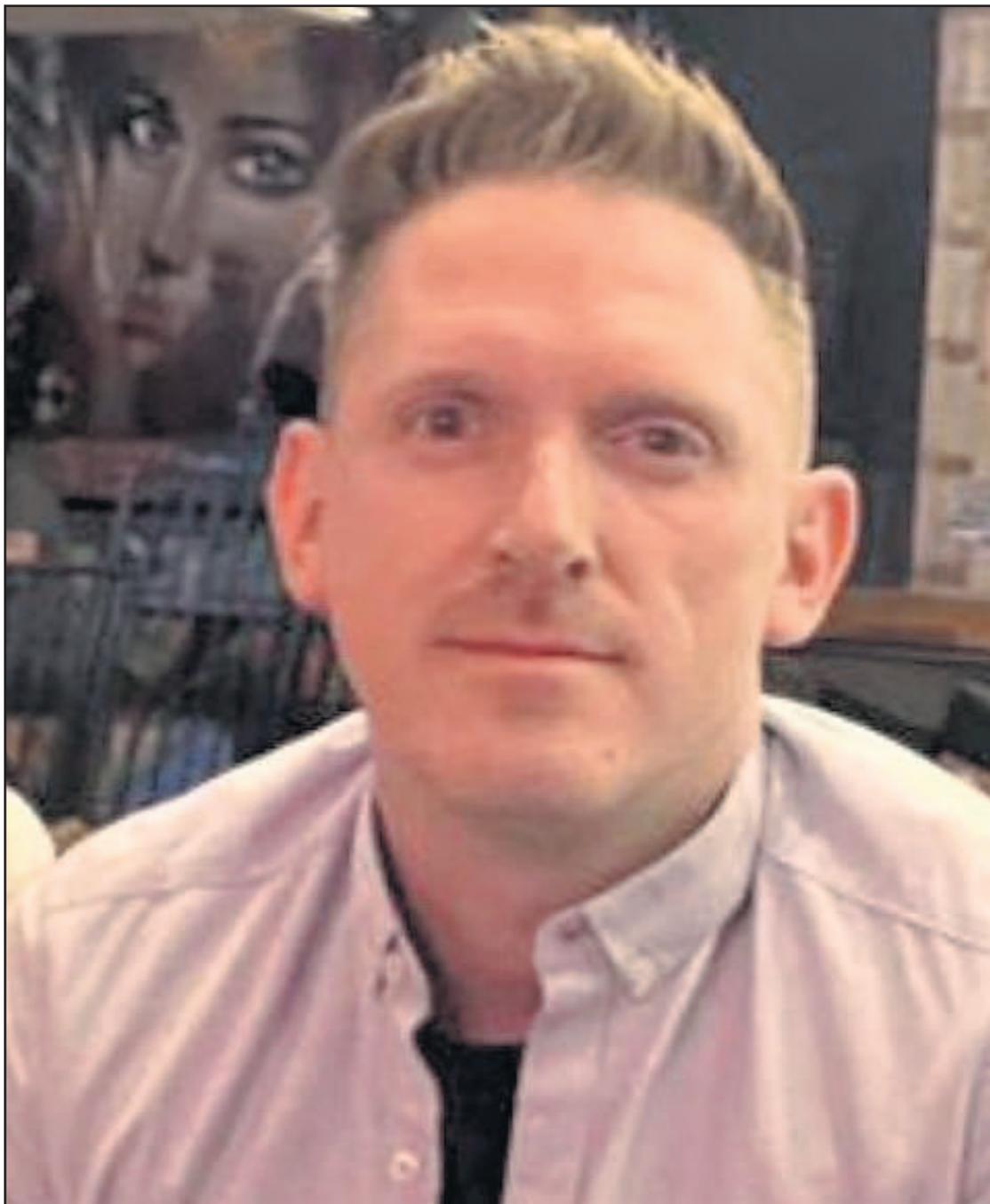
But any optimism crashed and burned when he was told the family had lost their house.

"I came back to help move all of our stuff. We found out dad was going to court charged with fraud," continued Pete.

"He got sentenced to 18 months in prison which was tough and completely out of nowhere."

As the family adjusted to their new reality, further angst lay just around the corner.

That year was horrific. I'd essentially lost my health, then dad and then my mum as well



■ Helping others - Pete Whitwell wants to use his experience to empower others

"A short while into my dad's sentence my mum was diagnosed with cancer. She died ten weeks later on August 13, 2009," he explained.

"That year was horrific. I'd essentially lost my health, then dad and then my mum as well."

The ex-history student was faced with no choice but to abandon his studies and move back home such was the toll of the unprecedented events.

Yet following a "horrific" year of getting his head around what had happened, Pete felt an air of acceptance about his new life.

And so indeed, life went on. It meant when 14 years' worth of grief finally hit him towards the end of last year, it landed a hefty blow.

He said: "I thought everything was fine but I was just numb.

"I then met someone on October 18

but somehow this triggered all this stuff from my past.

"Over the following two months the past events began to drain my self-esteem and my confidence. I realised I hadn't dealt with anything that happened back in 2009.

"I would sit at home and burst into working out what was going on in his head before everything eventually clicked in January.

Despite seeking professional help, Pete, who played football for Kelvedon Social for a number of years, had completely broken down by Christmas.

He said he became "obsessed" with working out what was going on in his head before everything eventually clicked in January.

"I began reliving it all by thinking about it on runs and how it made me feel when I was young," he added.

"I used it as fuel and equipped my-

self with the tools to deal with it.

"I started exercising every day, building up my confidence and proving I could beat my grief."

Pete will now be running a half marathon once a day between August 1 and 13, the anniversary of his mum's death, before doing a full marathon on August 18.

It will all be in aid of mental health charity the Charlie Watkins Foundation, which supports youngsters.

He said: "It's going to be a slog for two weeks but it is going to be symbolic of that awful year.

"The four days off will represent the past few years where I thought I was fine before I suddenly hit the most challenging part. If sharing my story helps just one person then that is the least I can do."

To support the fundraiser, visit bit.ly/41HJsB8.