**My experience of being refused healthcare at a doctor’s surgery and how it has affected my life**

*Kit Mattingly*

I am a boater. I live permanently on board and travel the canals of England, trading antique china from Manchester to London.

My licence to live on my narrowboat is as a boater without a home mooring. The terms and conditions of my licence oblige me to move every 14 days and to make a bona fide journey.

I have been a Traveller on and off since 1982. We have lived aboard the boat for seven years. I am 56 years old. My mother died of uterine cancer after breast cancer as a result of Tamoxifen in 2005. I have always been careful about breast lumps. In 2013 I found a lump in my right breast.

I went to the local medical practice and tried to get help. In spite of the fact that I knew I had a right to register without an address, the receptionist and I think the practice manager told me categorically they wouldn’t register me. I persisted telling the person behind the desk I had a lump and needed to be seen, compromising my own confidentiality in order to get help. A practice nurse came out and altered the process by seeing me and referring me for a mammogram. That mammogram turned out negative.

I found another lump in my breast about two years ago. I didn’t feel like taking on the medical practice but one year ago I tried again. This time the receptionist referred me on a visitors form. After confirmation that I had cancer I rang the practice to check I was registered correctly and was informed I was a couple of days later. I was later telephoned by the practice manager and told I must attend as I wasn’t actually registered.

On finding that I didn’t have a postcode when I attended the practice to register, things got complicated. I was sitting in the waiting room, the receptionist was to-ing and fro-ing between me and a practice manager in an office somewhere. Despite apparently wanting to help – they said they simply couldn’t proceed without a postcode. They took down a huge number of personal details in public, in the waiting room, in spite of my increasing distress. There were about 6 people in the room, it was just after lunch and the practice was not busy with clinic. They must have had a side room I could have gone to. They took my full name, date of birth, NHS number, previous address and medical history in public. By the end, I was close to tears.

Eventually the practice manager herself appeared. She was not satisfied with my son’s address as it was out of area but agreed to use it as a correspondence address. However she still refused to proceed without a postcode. Eventually in front of her, having explained where the boat would be while I had my operation and recovery (full mastectomy), I googled the postcode of the nearest streets. I clearly told her this was not an address and post would not be delivered. She was happy with the postcode and said correspondence would be sent to my son. Some was, quite a lot wasn’t.

The experience on both occasions was frustrating, demeaning and upsetting. The refusal of the first practice to register me resulted in two things. Firstly, I was unable to access screening. As a result of this, I went five years without a mammogram between the ages of 50 and 55. I simply could not see how to get screening and felt that there was little point in attempting it. Secondly, the experience I had at the first practice made me reluctant to try again, which proved to be the case. I only persisted with attempting to register a second time because I knew I actually had cancer.

It has turned out to be a stage 3 cancer. There were three tumours and five affected lymph nodes.

I asked the consultant if my tumours would have been picked up on a mammogram and he confirmed it would have been. I would have been compliant with screenings if I had been able to action them.

I feel that my inability to access routine healthcare due to my travelling lifestyle has compromised the doctors’ Hippocratic Oath to do no harm. I have a later stage cancer because I was not screened.

Despite the fact that I knew my rights, provided information on registering at a GP’s address and articulated my case, I had to compromise my confidentiality on two occasions to access belated care for an aggressive, life threatening disease which could have been caught years earlier.