The Alleged Lunatics’ Friend Society and the history of User Involvement

1845-1863

Dr Nick Hervey

‘In no other country than England, where private individuals perform so many of the local duties of government, would such a Society have ever been imagined ...... perhaps not one case in fifty will be brought to light by its exertions. But even the injustice of the remaining forty nine will be modified by its influence’

The Atlas, 28th April 1847

‘A nucleus attended by a splendid train of supporters’

The Times, 16th April 1846
Background to the creation of a pressure group

- Daniel Defoe questioned the dubious practices of private madhouses in *Augusta Triumphans* in 1728.
- Tobias Smollett described illegal confinement in his novel *Sir Launcelot Greaves* (1762).
- An article in the Gentleman’s Magazine (1763) mentioned innocents being, ‘decoyed into private madhouses, stripped by banditti and forcibly reduced by physic.’
- An act of parliament in 1774 introduced the first inspection system, followed by another in 1828 which established the Metropolitan Lunacy Commissioners.
- There were regular scares about illegal confinement and the inspection of public and charity asylums was only piecemeal.

*Viscount Sydney – Madhouses Act 1774*
Formation of the Alleged Lunatics’ Friend Society

• In 1838 Richard Paternoster, a former civil servant in the East India Company, was discharged after 41 days in William Finch's madhouse at Kensington. He had been detained following a disagreement with his father over money. Once free, he published a letter in the Times announcing his release.

• He was contacted by John Perceval, son of the assassinated Prime Minister Spencer Perceval, who had also spent time in two private asylums.
PERCEVAL'S NARRATIVE
A Patient's Account of His Psychosis, 1830-1832
Edited and with an Introduction by GREGORY BATESON

A Narrative Of The Treatment Experienced By A Gentleman, During A State Of Mental Derangement Designed To Explain The Causes And The Nature Of Insanity (1840)

John Thomas Perceval
Kessinger Legacy reprints
Other key members who joined them

• William Bailey (an inventor and business man who had spent several years in madhouses)
• Lewis Phillips (a glassware manufacturer who had been incarcerated in Thomas Warburton's asylum)
• John Parkin (a surgeon and former asylum patient)
• Captain Richard Saumarez (whose father was the surgeon Richard Saumarez, and whose two brothers were Chancery lunatics)
• Luke James Hansard (a philanthropist from the family of parliamentary printers who had a daughter who was mentally ill).
• Gilbert Bolden joined later, and acted as their solicitor & legal advisor
• This group was to form the core of the Alleged Lunatics' Friend Society, although the ALFS would not be formally founded until 1845. ALFS was a mixture of former patients, relatives and interested public figures including lawyers and a number of radical MPs.
Initial actions

• The group began their campaign by sending letters to the press, lobbying MPs and government officials, and publishing pamphlets.

• John Perceval was elected to the Board of Poor Law Guardians in the parish of Kensington (although he was opposed to the New Poor Law) but this meant he could join magistrates on their inspection visits to asylums used by the parish.

• Richard Paternoster and Lewis Phillips brought court cases against the people who had incarcerated them.

• John Perceval published his two books about his experiences of asylum care.

• Richard Paternoster wrote a series of articles for the *Satirist* magazine, which were then published in 1841 as a book called *The Madhouse System*
Setting up

• The Alleged Lunatics' Friend Society was formally created on July 7th 1845.

• A pamphlet the following year set out its aims, ‘That this Society is formed for the protection of the British subject from unjust confinement, on the grounds of mental derangement, and for the redress of persons so confined;

• Also for the protection of all persons confined as lunatic patients from cruel and improper treatment.

• That this Society will receive applications from persons complaining of being unjustly treated, or from their friends, will aid them in obtaining legal advice, and otherwise assist and afford them all proper protection.

• That the Society will endeavour to procure a reform in the laws and treatment affecting the arrest, detention, and release of persons treated as of unsound mind
Aims of the Society

• better protection against wrongful confinement and medical experiments
• safeguards on invasive treatment without consent
• free passage of mail for patients
• automatic post mortem on all deaths in asylums
• the abolition of private asylums
• greater rights for patients
• more say for patients in decisions about their treatment
• a better class of attendants in asylums
• greater involvement of the clergy in asylums
Philosophy behind the ALFS

• Its general philosophy stemmed from traditional appeals to Anglo-Saxon law, Magna Carta, the writings of Edward Coke and most controversially Tom Paine’s the Rights of Man

• These all stressed certain inalienable freedoms guaranteed by the Constitution for the welfare of society as a whole, including freedom from unfair imprisonment, freedom to have a Minister of your own religion visit you

• Perceval criticised the new moral treatment as the imposition of society’s values on an individual - he called it ‘repression by mildness and coaxing, and by solitary confinement.’

King John signing the Magna Carta
Strategy

The Society had four main avenues for influencing change:

1. Through Parliament and Government
2. Through the legal system
3. Through the local magistrates who visited asylums and madhouses outside London
4. Through the press, public lectures and meetings
In 1845 the ALFS secured some important clauses in Shaftesbury’s Lunacy Acts through the radical MP Thomas Duncombe, including the clause insisting licensees of private asylums should live on the premises, that doctors should state the facts about a person’s illness on their admission certificates and that all deaths should be reported within 48 hours. This was done in the face of great opposition.

The Society forwarded draft Bills to Parliament in 1847, 1848, 1851 and 1853.

Many of its ideas were ignored though. They wanted patients’ legal rights displayed on wards, that medical reports should record where patients denied the validity of their detention, that their property should have a seal placed on it, and that some asylums where patients could be admitted voluntarily should be opened.

In 1853 they petitioned Parliament, and got several clauses put into the Lunacy Act including one making a coroner’s report mandatory when a patient died in suspicious circumstances.

In 1859 the MP William Tite, an ALFS member, secured a Select Committee to look into the care of Lunatics, and Perceval was called as one of the witnesses.
Use of the Legal System

• The Society couldn’t afford a lot of litigation, but it did take strategic cases to court, and was prepared to issues writs of habeus corpus, bringing patients to court for a judge to decide about their future.
• Between 1845 and 1863 it took up the cases of at least 70 patients.
• There were ten lawyers involved with ALFS
• The Society’s QC James Russell, an expert in Chancery Law, joined the Law Amendment Society, and through it got influential lawyers like the former Lord Chancellors, Lords Brougham and Lyndhurst interested in ALFS’ campaign
• Richard Saumarez led the campaign to address the abuses in the court of Chancery, which was tasked with the protection of the mentally ill who had significant property
Influencing through the Magistrates

- The local magistrates were responsible for visiting asylums outside London.
- ALFS members used their local connections to influence magistrates.
- In 1848 they supported Purnell Bransby Purnell, chairman of the Gloucester Quarter Sessions to investigate the Bristol madhouses.
- In Kent a father referred to Purnell’s work when complaining about the treatment of his son, and he listed a number of reforms he wanted, all of which were part of the ALFS programme.
- Saumarez influenced investigations in Bath where he had a second home.
- At Pickering in York, Bolden informed local Poor Law Guardians that they were entitled to visit their paupers in the County Asylum, a fact they were unaware of.
Examples of influencing through the Press, public lectures and Meetings

- Wakley, the owner of the Lancet highlighted their cases and acknowledged their work.
- Other ALFS members used their own columns to promote the ALFS’ work – Peter Borthwick (Editor of the Morning Post), James Russell (Annual Register) and William Carpenter (Sunday Times).
- 28th March 1848 meeting at British Coffee House to prepare a petition asking for a Select Committee.
- 1st May 1850 lecture in Kensington in support of a patient Frederick Mundell.
- In August 1858 Perceval delivered a lecture in Northampton alluding to the abuses currently going on in the Northampton Asylum.
PUBLIC LECTURE
ON THE
REFORM OF THE LAW OF LUNACY.

A LECTURE
ON THE ABOVE SUBJECT, WILL BE GIVEN BY 
JOHN T. PERCEVAL, ESQ.

AT THE 
KING'S ARMS TAVERN,
HIGH STREET, KENSINGTON,
ON WEDNESDAY, MAY 1ST,
AT SEVEN O'CLOCK, P.M.

WHEN THE ABUSES OF THE LAW WILL BE ILLUSTRATED BY SEVERAL CASES OF OPPRESSION RECENTLY BROUGHT TO LIGHT, AND BY THE EXAMPLE OF A GENTLEMAN WHO WAS LATELY SEIZED BY THE POLICE OF THE METROPOLIS UNDER CIRCUMSTANCES OF GROSS OUTRAGE AND INJUSTICE.
Individual cases pursued

• Dr Edward Peithman was a German tutor who had been falsely imprisoned in Bethlem Hospital for fourteen years after he had tried to gain access to Prince Albert. John Perceval took up his case and, after the Commissioners in Lunacy released him in February 1854, took him home with him to Herne Bay. Almost immediately Dr Peithman tried to gain access to Prince Albert again, and was committed to Hanwell Asylum. Once again Perceval obtained his release, this time escorting him back to Germany
Jane Bright

- This woman came from a wealthy Leicestershire family, the Brights of Skeffington Hall. She was seduced by a doctor who took most of her money and left her pregnant. Soon after the birth of her child, her brothers had her committed to Northampton Hospital to gain access to her inheritance. After her release Gilbert Bolden, the Society's solicitor, helped her recover the remains of her fortune from her family.
Arthur Legent Pearce

• Poems by a Prisoner in Bethlem. Edited by John Perceval, Esq., Honorary Secretary to the Alleged Lunatics' Friend Society.

• Perceval befriended surgeon, Arthur Legent Pearce after he started visiting him in the Criminal Wing at Bethlem where he had been placed for seriously assaulting his wife.

• The verses chiefly consist of sonnets and paraphrases of Scripture, and were written as an occupation during his confinement. He hoped that they would be presented to the Visiting Physician, Dr. Bright, with a request that they might be shown to the poet Barry Cornwall, who was a Lunacy Commissioner at the time. Perceval encouraged him to publish them - hoping to raise a fund from the profits to provide their author with some extra comforts beyond the hospital allowance.
Charles Verity

- Verity was serving a two-year prison sentence when he was transferred to Northampton Hospital. He contacted John Perceval in 1857 about abuses in the refractory ward there and the Society secured an inquiry. The Commissioners in Lunacy reported the following year that charges of cruelty and ill-usage had been established against various attendants and the culprits had been dismissed.
Lack of Support for the Society

- "We can scarcely understand what such a society can propose to accomplish... There have been, no doubt, many cases of grievous oppression in which actual lunatics have been treated with cruelty, and those who are only alleged to be insane have been most unlawfully imprisoned... These, however, are evils to be checked by the law and not tampered with... by a body of private individuals... Some of the names we have seen announced suggest to us the possibility that the promoters of this scheme are not altogether free from motives of self-preservation.

- There is no objection to a set of gentlemen joining together in this manner for their own protection... but we think they should be satisfied to take care of themselves, without tendering their services to all who happen to be in the same position."

Times 27th March 1846
Line of successors

- **The Lunacy Law Reform Association** 1873-1885 (very polemical and led by Louisa Lowe, a vicar’s wife who had been incarcerated because of her spiritualism)

- **The National Society for Lunacy Reform** 1920-30 (started life as the National Council for Lunacy Reform). Founded after two private conferences in London. Its aims were to promote research into the causes of mental illness, to highlight problems with the care system, to set up hostels for ‘early’ cases, and to safeguard patient liberties. It secured a Royal Commisison in 1926 but was disappointed in subsequent legislation in 1929.

- **National Association for Mental Health** founded 1946 (became MIND in 1972)
National Association of Mental Health (NAMH)

• General Secretary Mary Applebey (1916-2012)
• Had experienced the reality of mental illness owing to her mother’s mental health problems
• Campaigned tirelessly between 1951-76 on behalf of the rights of people with mental health problems
• NAMH provided the only training available for psychiatric social workers, mental welfare officers, and teachers of those with learning difficulties, also pioneered community services
• It set up the Mental Health Film Council to serve as a focus of advice to the industry, and to promote good mental health
• Mary spent several days as a ward resident to enrich her understanding of the patients' experience
• She encouraged the development of patient user groups in order for them to challenge the system
User involvement develops beyond a protest culture

- Mad Pride [Pete Shaughnessy]
- Creative Routes
- Cool Tan Arts
- Government policy changed to encourage it
- Coherent places at the top table for joint planning [moving on from tokenism]
- Involvement through user involvement banks: in training staff, CMHTs with a user involvement plan, guidance for managers on involving users, user led surveys, data metrics systems with user involvement, user access to enter data in their patient record
- Personal Budgets
- Joint learning (Recovery College)
Conclusion

- The Society was effective – often doctors highlighted its ‘intrusive’ methods as a way of gaining the Lunacy Commission’s support.

**Quote from T H Tuke**, Owner of Manor House, Chiswick after Perceval visited the detained Chartist leader Fearus O’Connor, ‘I assure you I would rather see the devil in my asylum than you.’ Perceval had already cost him a patient worth £300 per annum.

Other doctors though did look to ALFS as a force for good. Dr Nesbitt wrote to Perceval in 1861 about the need for an Act legalising voluntary admissions, ‘I deem you to be the great pioneer to whom we are indebted for the initiation of various beneficial changes.’

- ALFS did influence the inclusion of some significant protections for patients in new Legislation
- The Society forced the Home Office to pull the Lunacy Commission into line on a number of occasions
- ALFS helped a number of individual patients to obtain their freedom or greater relaxation of their restrictions.
"The importance of the Alleged Lunatics’ Friend Society lies in the wide panorama of ideas it laid before Shaftesbury's Lunacy Commission. Unrestrained by the traditions of bureaucratic office, it was free to explore a variety of alternatives for care of the mentally ill, many of which were too visionary or impolitic to stand a chance of implementation. The difficulty it faced was the blinkered perspective of the Commission and of Shaftesbury in particular... it would not be an exaggeration of the Society's worth to say that patients' rights, asylum care, and medical accountability all suffered with its demise in the 1860s

Nick Hervey, 1986
Further reading

Advocacy or Folly: The Alleged Lunatics’ Friend Society, 1845-1863
Dr Nicholas Hervey

Medical History, 1986, 30 pp.245-275