

“I lost both my wife and my mother this year”: Former UK National Health Service worker Charles Persinger speaks to the Global Workers’ Inquest into the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Charles Persinger is a 56-year-old semi-retired positive behavioural support worker. He wrote to the World Socialist Web Site (WSWS) in support of the Global Workers Inquest into the COVID-19 Pandemic. His mother Susan was killed by COVID-19 this January, after contracting the virus in hospital last December. His wife Katie, a care home manager, succumbed to the virus in February.

Since Katie’s death, Charles has run the Twitter account Katie’s Voice in tribute to her and to speak out about the dangers posed to others by COVID-19. He is closely involved with the Covid-19 Bereaved Families for Justice campaign.

Charles told the WSWS, “My wife worked in care for 25-plus years. I worked in care for about 10 years. I’ve always been in frontline positions, working in key worker roles. I also had a stint working security.

“Last year, during the pandemic, I went back into healthcare, working in the private sector, with people with learning disability and mental health issues.

“My story started in December [2020] when my mother and wife both contracted COVID. My mother Susan was admitted into a hospital. She took a fall—she was elderly and had early onset dementia. She didn’t have it so badly that she wasn’t aware there was a pandemic. She was aware and taking all the precautions: sanitising and wearing a mask and social distancing. She took it all very seriously to keep herself safe.

“She took a fall and was admitted to hospital. Fourteen days later we got a phone call: ‘Your mother’s got COVID.’ That’s when our train wreck started, when the problems with COVID really hit our family. That was the first time somebody I knew had caught COVID.

“Because she was elderly and frail, an 85-year-old woman, COVID took her pretty quickly. Within a fortnight she had died from pneumonia caused by COVID. She basically suffocated to death.

“We did get a phone call and I did get to see my mother before she died. While I was visiting my mother, I also got a phone call from my wife Katie and she says, ‘I’ve got COVID’. My wife had contracted COVID while I was visiting my mother in hospital, watching my mum die.

“She was an assistant care home manager. While my elderly mother was dying in hospital my wife was working on the front lines. COVID had gotten into the home, staff were dropping like flies, patients were getting sick, they were struggling to cover shifts and everything else.

“My wife dedicated her life to caring for people. She couldn’t just stand back, sit at home and do nothing. She went to work, where she then contracted COVID. She had had her COVID injection the day before on

the 18th and contracted it on the 19th.

“I lost both my wife and my mother this year. My mother died in January. I got to spend time with her. And then I came straight home to look after Katie.

“I managed to look after her for about three or four days. She said she was feeling okay, just a bit fluey. But then it came quickly, really quickly when it hit. Within three or four days she was becoming really unwell to the point where I knew I couldn’t look after her anymore. I could see her stats were dropping, she was struggling to breathe, she was uncomfortable, her temperature was rising—the whole spectrum of what COVID does to you.

“I phoned her an ambulance, and that in itself was a major challenge, just getting her to a hospital, because at that time our National Health Service was overwhelmed.

“They had a car come out with paramedics who did the best they could for my wife. They gave her oxygen, tried to stabilise her and that sort of thing. But we waited over two-and-a-half hours for an ambulance. This is a lady who was very, very sick, very ill at that point.

“The ambulance crew had to really push to get an ambulance to come out to us. They had to pull an ambulance in from one of the local villages to Swindon in order to take my wife to hospital. They had to use one working in the rural areas and pull it into town.”

From his own experience, and his wife’s, Charles “knew the situation.” The hospitals were running out of beds. They were taking people from care homes and then they were realising they couldn’t really help them so what they were doing is sending them back into care homes. Even though they were infected. My wife was telling me about this as it was all unravelling.

“They used the councils to put pressure on the care homes. That’s how they did it. They didn’t get the NHS directly to do it. And they were obviously collapsing under the pressure.

“We all know this now, but I could see it happening at the time. We were living it. Myself and my wife working in the care industry at the time: we knew the challenges that were being faced. She was telling me every day how they were waiting on masks to come into the care homes, they were waiting on sanitiser. They were giving plastic aprons and paper masks to protect themselves from an airborne virus.”

Charles’s wife had been in hospital for a month when “I got a phone call saying ‘we’re going to put your wife on a ventilator, here you go, talk to her. You’ve got about two minutes.’ That was the last time I ever

got to speak to her. You can't cover it in two minutes, everything that needs to be said.

"I got some closure, whereas so many people got none. I just feel so terribly sad for those families. I had some. Not nearly enough, not what we deserved. But at least I got that, and I'm eternally grateful. I think that was to do with me being very, very pushy. When I went to see my wife, they had me in full PPE, the full suit, everything, they took every precaution to keep me safe.

"It's still something that haunts me and will do for a long time."

Of the government's national response to the virus, Charles said, "The plan they had in place was inadequate. I believe there were some exercises they had done previously, looking at our pandemic response, and they found them inadequate. They hadn't bolstered this inadequate plan.

"The health service wasn't prepared. The community didn't have plans in place either. The government worked with the private sector—they weren't prepared. Look at the Nightingale [temporary field] hospitals, were they used? Look at our test and trace? £37 billion spent. That's insane money. That would pay to help get people to hospital quicker, wouldn't it? That would pay for ventilators.

"I feel the NHS now is being set up to fail so it's easier to sell off. From the inside looking out, that's what I see. They've set us up to fail."

Charles was particularly concerned with the spread of COVID-19 through schools. "I'm absolutely disgusted. At the end of the day children are our most valuable resource. As far as I'm concerned there's nothing more valuable than our children.

"Unvaccinated children are being sent into schools unprotected, without mitigations, without masks, without air filters, there's no social distancing. We know very well that we have some of the most overcrowded schools in Europe.

"Some of those families have clinically vulnerable members, or even the child themselves is clinically vulnerable. But our government is using truancy legislation to force parents to send their children, their vulnerable child, into school to catch COVID and come home and give it to their vulnerable parent or sibling.

"It's disgusting that a government would even consider prosecuting a family that's trying to protect life. When a government then turns round and says I'm going to use the powers of the state and truancy laws, as far as I'm concerned that's then totally unforgivable. It's bordering on fascism. I'm sorry but that's how I feel."

Speaking about the dangers posed to education workers, Charles said, "All these people are key workers. They're hit the hardest in this pandemic. It's key workers who are dying. Them and the elderly. We've taken the pandemic full in the face.

"I think they've still got herd immunity going on in schools, particularly with younger children. They're going into these schools unmitigated, they're not vaccinated, they haven't had air filters. Until these schools are made safe, we shouldn't be opening them."

Asked what response to the pandemic he thought was necessary, Charles said, "Till there's vaccine equality globally, no one is safe. That's the crux of it. Until we have that, COVID's not going away. It requires a global response to get rid of a global pandemic.

"We know for a fact, it's been substantiated by science, that the more you allow the virus to spread, the more likely it is to mutate. So why aren't we locking down? Why aren't we trying to slow the spread? Why aren't we shutting borders quicker?"

"The first spikes, our reaction was absolutely abysmal—slow, heel-dragging—and it led to tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands of deaths. We're not mitigating, even simple things like masks and air filters. They work, we know they work. So why aren't they being pushed more? Why aren't we enforcing it? Why aren't we seeing social distancing, smaller class sizes, home working, home education? There's so much we can do that we're not doing.

"And we have proven that it can be done. There are companies out there that function perfectly fine through home working. Systems are in place, they're easily implemented. We can educate our children at home if necessary.

"I don't want to take people's freedoms away. I understand that being locked down is hard. But we need to circuit break these new variants, to give science a chance to catch up. We're not doing it..."

"You have to take the most draconian measures sometimes, or some people see them as draconian. But trying to save somebody's life at the expense of a few little liberties like having to wear a mask or social distance in a shop isn't unreasonable. When you're looking at the greater good and a virus that has killed over five million people, it has to be taken seriously.

"The sooner you take these measures, the sooner you can go back to living your life. But until COVID is eradicated, none of us are safe. We must have a global strategy. It's not good enough to have measures for just one country, because we know COVID likes to travel. There has to be a global pandemic response and we have to take the financial consideration out of that and look at public health."

Charles added, "The worst thing to ever say is, 'We have to live with COVID.' It's the most ridiculous thing I can ever hear because we're not living with COVID are we, when a thousand people are dying a week? That's not 'living with COVID' in my mind; that's dying with COVID. You hear MPs saying it, 'We have to get used to living with COVID.' No, we don't.

"I'm still convinced the government are putting the economy before the wellbeing of the nation. They're worried about their stocks and shares. It's obvious what's going on. And they should be worried. That will collapse around them. That bubble isn't going to last forever, is it?"

Charles demanded answers for the appalling treatment of health and care workers. "They know they gave people inadequate PPE. I want to know who made these decisions and I want to know why they thought it was acceptable to put our frontline staff, our care workers and our NHS staff, in that position. It's totally unacceptable.

"The government ministers in charge of this country should be answering questions and be held to account for the decisions they made. It's gone on too long." His colleagues, he said, "past and present, feel the same."

"The fact of the matter is, they won't take accountability, so we have to force it down their throats."



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