

## **“Interesting times” to be providing, or receiving OST in England.**



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To paraphrase the Chinese curse, these are “interesting times” to be providing, or receiving OST in England.

Over two decades ago, OST provision in England was patchy, inadequate, difficult and slow to access, and very often time limited. However thanks to the application of scientific evidence and regulatory scrutiny from the National Treatment Agency, and considerable government investment, what followed was a massive growth of services to the extent that it was possible for most to access well delivered OST in a matter of days, be titrated up to adequate evidence-concordant doses, and receive adjuvant psychosocial support for as long as it was needed, in nearly every corner of the country – it wasn’t perfect of course, it is always a struggle to engineer good humane treatment for socially marginalised people and services continued to be (another euphemism) “variable” – but , progress was massive, lives were extended, families kept together and many with opiate dependency were able to be treated with compassion and respect where hitherto there had been disdain and prejudice.

With the change to a Conservative led coalition government around 6 years ago, there followed a “re-balancing” of an essentially harm reduction approach, with greater emphasis on abstinence orientation. This caused a lot of disquiet in treatment providers (myself included) – the driver for this re-balancing was undoubtedly rooted in political prejudice which should never trump scientific evidence when it comes to health care, but in fact there is little doubt that treatment had been lacking in ambition for our patients: whilst we had been smugly congratulating ourselves for all of the harm that we were undoubtedly reducing, this came at the price of many achieving independence from addiction, and from us, as soon as they might. I feel that the current balance is much healthier – OST should still be available quickly, in proper doses, and with plenty of wrap around support, ETE and housing access etc – but through it all there is an explicit message that this is a means to an independent end - however long that takes.

However, no sooner had this more mature treatment ethos become embedded, than the dual disasters of the Health and Social Care Act and austerity followed. The HSCA saw protected drug treatment budgets taken from the stewardship of the NTA and passed over to Local Authorities, who almost immediately were set draconian funding cuts in response to the banking crisis. The new horizon is one of local apparatchiks serving local interests, often with little or no understanding of what drug treatment is about, having to choose which

budgets to slash – and when having to choose between social care, safeguarding children, keeping little old ladies in care homes and their jobs depending on ingratiating the local electorate, it is easy to see why drug treatment budgets are feeling the full brunt of draconian cuts.

So from well resourced and centrally funded and monitored treatment we have moved to treatment at the whim of localism in an atmosphere of feverish austerity – the future is bleak – services will lose staff, treatment will undoubtedly become difficult and slow to access once again, and it is very possible that to make treatment available to as many as need it, the excuse of time limiting treatment may re-surface. I wish that I could be more optimistic – but I can't.

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### OST – a vignette

John and Louise met under a railway arch in London – they shared an old mattress and slept under cardboard boxes. They had both run away from very abusive families – John from the West Country, Louise from Yorkshire. They left their homes when they were only just teenagers, completely under the radar of social services – no one noticed they had left, no one even bothered to report them missing. John hadn't been to school for years and was unable to read or write. By the time that they met under that railway arch they were in their late teens, both with injecting heroin habits. Their relationship was more about self-preservation than anything else, and John started stealing more so that Louise wouldn't have to continue to sell herself.

After another year or two, they decided to move back to Somerset where John had some friends who he hoped they could stay with, and it was there, after Louise had been discharged following an emergency admission with another accidental overdose, that I met them, about eight years ago. I did no more than anyone else in our profession would have done, which was to get them both titrated up to a proper dose (of methadone for both of them) and allocate them the support and skills of a keyworker. Without the daily demands of miserable withdrawal symptoms, obtaining the funds, using drugs and repeating this several times each and every day – they were able to take stock of their lives and what they wanted to achieve. Opportunities are few for drug addicts with criminal records and health problems, and progress has not been quick...but it has been remarkable.

When I last saw them around a year ago, they had been housed in a tiny bungalow in a small country town: John had been to literacy classes and they were both working in the only local business, which poetically was a cardboard packaging company – Louise had even made it to being a supervisor. They lead quiet lives – John likes a bit of fishing, Louise likes walking their dog. They are both still on methadone, and actually when they come home from work each day, they still smoke a bit of heroin – it still serves a bit of purpose in easing old memories.

So Louise and John have come a very long way – OST hasn't achieved this for them – their own resilience and the opportunities and encouragement offered by my colleagues has done most of that. And if anyone says to me that this is not "recovery" because they are still smoking a bit of heroin, then I would cheerfully punch them. Because this story is the very embodiment of what recovery from addiction *really* means...and I doubt it would have been possible without the stability and safety that OST has given them. Indeed I doubt that they would still even be alive.