

Letters 8 September 2023

Martha's Rule may help save lives in the future

Merope Mills rightly refers to “a culture dominated by hierarchy, status and overconfidence” – clinicians depriving patients and their families of agency and confidence, thus wasting an important source of intimate patient expertise (*My daughter Martha died needlessly in hospital – we believe this change would have saved her*, 4 September).

Martha's Rule is an excellent idea to empower patients and their loved ones when they are at their most vulnerable, confronted with a clinicians' culture used to withholding and downplaying bad news, or blaming patients for their own misfortune. All of this happened in my daughter's case.

Gaia died in the same year as Martha in another London teaching hospital, 17 hours after admission with undiagnosed raised pressure in her brain – an emergency that needs immediate treatment. I was not contacted or updated on how seriously ill Gaia was. When I turned up at the hospital, I was sent home with the promise that a doctor would call and update me. This call never came. I was beyond myself with worry.

There was no number or system or person to turn to for help, for escalation, for someone to tell me anything truthful about Gaia's situation, or for me to confirm that my daughter was not a recreational drug user as her doctors had wrongly assumed. I was completely kept out of my daughter's last hours. As Gaia was not able to speak for herself because of her confused state, her dying voice wasn't heard.

Like Martha, Gaia was never escalated in time to critical care. She died alone under her shocked doctors' noses at the age of 25.

I, too, believe that an easy-to-contact and quick-to-respond “external second opinion” would cut through clinicians' own unhealthy concerns, prioritise patient safety and have the potential to save lives – especially in emergency situations at weekends when our NHS is at its most vulnerable, with wards mainly staffed with junior doctors and consultants on call.

Dorit Young
London