

HEALTH

Is this the end of our end-of-life unit?

Mary Burnett from Action4Whipps on the fight to save the Margaret Centre



The centre's new garden, unveiled less than two years ago
Credit Barts Health

Who would have thought that the death of a partner could be a magic experience? But it was.” These are the words of Helen McClennon, whose husband died at the Margaret Centre in Whipps Cross Hospital surrounded by his entire family, including grandchildren. Her appreciation for the work it does caring for patients at the very end of their life is not unique but the centre itself most certainly is, which is why the prospect of losing it is terrifying. Where most hospices are run by charities, the NHS-run Margaret Centre – in the words of ward manager Knut Sanghajit – “can do things that are just a bit outside the normal NHS service”, while still offering hospital care. In a video put out by Barts Health NHS Trust in September 2019, he describes how only that day the son of a woman who died there two years prior returned to remember her. It’s a touching moment that’s unlikely to be repeated if the centre’s 12 beds are salami sliced and dotted around busy wards. In August 2020, less than two years ago, Barts unveiled the centre’s new private garden, funded by donations from Barts Charity. In their announcement, they spoke glowingly about how “having a specialist unit means palliative needs can be prioritised in a more efficient and sensitive way”. At the same time, they were planning to sell the land it sits on. There was no mention of the Margaret Centre in public engagement meetings about the new hospital in the autumn of 2020. Following huge public concern, Barts wrote reassuringly last September about plans to relocate it, promising more details in April, but otherwise their refrain continues to be that end-of-life care will be provided in beds across the new hospital and improved services in people’s homes. Meanwhile, the multiple services once provided by the centre, allowing for continuity of care, are now seemingly being scattered across North East London. St Joseph’s Hospice in Hackney, run by a charity, has already been handed the reins for respite care and discussions are being held about it taking over outreach as well. These have always been important parts of the work the Margaret Centre does, allowing staff and patients to get to know each other before admission becomes necessary. The desperation I and other members of Action4Whipps have to save the centre is why it’s so gratifying to see some local councillors finally stepping up to scrutinise the hospital plans. Waltham Forest, Redbridge and Essex councillors have now had two meetings of the special joint committee created to debate the hospital project and, during their last, recommended that a “discrete inpatient facility” for end-of-life care be included in the new Whipps. Both Redbridge councillors in particular were vocal about the valued work of the centre, speaking powerfully about their concerns for its future. It’s clear public concern, community campaigning, and letters to Barts from Redbridge Council and our three MPs have had an impact – but we need to do much much more.

To join our campaign or for more information contact whipps.cross.campaign@gmail.com.