

Speech: Why I'm determined to win the war against 'silent killer' sepsis

Looking back over my 5 years as Health Secretary, one conversation that left the deepest mark was very early on with a young couple from Devon.

Scott and Sue Morrish came to London to tell me about the tragic death of their 3-year-old son Sam, who died just a few days before Christmas in 2010 after a repeated failure to spot that he was suffering from sepsis. Scott and Sue quietly and eloquently explained the story of his illness, and finally treatment that came too late.

They said that when they tried to raise the issue with their local NHS, the 'shutters came down' and no one wanted to talk to them.

I have talked to the hospital concerned and believe the culture has now dramatically changed. But the fact is that in the UK, around 123,000 people of all ages develop sepsis every year, with potentially 30,000 avoidable deaths.

It is often referred to as the silent killer because the early symptoms – fever, lethargy and pallor – can be mistaken for other problems.

The key is to spot the problem early and administer antibiotics and fluids quickly to halt the infection in its tracks.

But in Sam's case, no fewer than 4 healthcare providers had missed opportunities to identify the condition and administer the treatment that could have saved his life.

Today, on World Sepsis Day, I remember the conversation with Sam's parents and pay tribute to their courage and determination – alongside other sepsis campaigners like Melissa Mead – to raise awareness and change practices within the NHS.

Their campaigning has already triggered a much tighter, more systematic approach to identifying and treating the condition.

Many hospitals have now put in place clear guidelines and training to ensure that every member of their medical team is trained to spot the signs and symptoms of sepsis and treat them effectively. And practical measures like routinely checking patients arriving at Accident & Emergency departments for signs of sepsis are estimated to have saved almost a thousand lives in recent years.

But do I think even more deaths could be prevented? The answer is, undoubtedly, yes. That's why we are now setting out further measures to improve standards in hospitals, surgeries and other healthcare settings.

It will mean more training resources, greater awareness and better recording

and identification of sepsis cases across the NHS. Every part of the NHS will be expected to be on the highest alert to tackle this killer condition.

But everyone needs to help win the fight against sepsis – by being aware of the facts.

If you do one thing this week, please [watch and share the awareness video](#) that we've developed in partnership with Melissa Mead and the UK Sepsis Trust.

By understanding what sepsis is and how it shows itself in people of different ages, we can all arm ourselves with the information to keep our loved ones safe.

Let's be smart about sepsis – and together, we can finally win the war against this silent killer.