

CARE HOME OWNER PRAISES BRAVE WHISTEBLOWERS

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Reporter*

THE owner of Milford Manor care home in Salisbury has praised the bravery of whistleblowers whose evidence this week in court brought the conviction of a senior carer for mistreating elderly residents.

Matthew Airey said he was “immensely proud” of the carers who testified against their former colleague, Agneskia Sztokmanska.

Mr Airey, who runs Wessex Care, the company behind five care homes in the city and south Wiltshire, with his wife, Pauline, said: “It sounds a strange thing to say but we are delighted with the conviction.

“I am particularly delighted for the three very brave members of staff who stepped forward when they did.

“When you are working incredibly close with someone and you see them do something inappropriate, it is very hard to stand up and speak out, and I and my wife impress on our staff they will always have our support. We will not stand to have anyone harm our residents.

“People will say to me shouldn’t they have done it sooner and the answer is yes, you can always do it quicker but I emphasise, it is an incredibly difficult thing to whistleblow.”

Sztokmanska was first investigated when a fellow carer questioned the appearance of a small cut on the forehead and nose of a resident at the specialist dementia home in Milford Manor Gardens.

Following care home procedure, the manager, Julie Oakes, looked into the possible reasons why it had occurred, and in doing so, prompted three carers to speak out over the ill-treatment of residents they had witnessed by Sztokmanska.

On Friday (yesterday) the 45-year-old was found guilty of throwing shoes at a resident, pulling the hair of another resident, punching a resident in the back and pulling a resident along the floor by his pyjamas and down some steps.

Mr Airey said: "Looking at the reasons behind little marks and knocks is particularly vital for our residents who cannot protect themselves, and in this case it nudged staff to say something.

"People with dementia are completely vulnerable, they have no voice. If you do horrible things to them, half an hour later they will have forgotten it. Their defence is us and it's inexcusable to think I'm feeling stressed therefore it's ok to punch someone."

Sztokmanska joined the care home in 2010, becoming a senior carer in 2012, before being suspended in March 2013. During her trial at Salisbury Crown Court, the court heard from witnesses who said the mother-of-two would call residents "monsters" and "idiots" but also from those who said she was a "brilliant" carer.

Mr Airey said: "Once the police had dealt with the initial investigation, we picked through all the information in order to see whether there was any supporting evidence for any further incidents during the time Agnes was employed by us. We had external help as well and spoke to the other staff that had worked with her and in my experience, when you get a couple of people coming forward, others then consider it's safe to say what's on their mind.

"The earliest incident that occurred was somewhere around December 2012 and she was then suspended in March 2013. There is no evidence to suggest she was behaving in this way before that time – in fact the opposite. This was someone who went out of her way to come in even in her own time to take residents out. She didn't show the characteristics of somebody who was stressed so something happened in those last 12 weeks. I don't know what.

“It’s not any issue about the home – it’s an issue about one rogue employee at a specific point in her life. We are as confident as we can be that there were no other incidents.”

Part of the defence during the trial was to highlight the care home having just two carers on nightshift duty and a workload that involved taking care of residents, the laundry and cleaning. It also drew attention to the low wages and high costs of residential care.

Mr Airey, a former child protection officer in Wiltshire who has worked in health and social care services for more than 30 years, said the number of staff on duty at the time was “perfectly appropriate” based on the needs of residents.

He said: “Staffing levels here change based on the needs of the residents. We have a dependency tool which looks at the dementia levels of our residents and that gives us an idea of staffing requirements.

“While we recently increased the number of carers to three on nightshift, that was because some residents were getting to a later stage of dementia and required more attention. We have since reduced that back to two because residents have passed away and we have a lot of more mobile residents who can do a lot of the care themselves.”

Mr Airey said Wessex Care is soon to invest £10 million into the five homes it runs in order to make them “fit for purpose” for the next 20 to 30 years, and as part of this, CCTV systems will be installed in each home.

He said: “I would like, as every other provider, to pay people more but the issue on what we pay is actually not governed by the so-called profit margin.

“I am a businessman but I also have 30 years experience in caring for vulnerable people so I do have a heart – as a nation we have to decide how much our older people are worth in terms of their care. There is a huge debate that older people always seem to come off last when local authorities are faced with tight budgets.

“It’s massively under-funded – everybody knows it – and as a result people who should be paid more aren’t but that’s not about minimum wage, which is what we pay for someone who’s training, that’s a much bigger issue.”

He added: “Of course I earn a living but no more than I did as a senior manager in social services neither does my wife – the profits are going back into the service. It’s simple to say it’s all about profits – yes, there are some very large service providers owned by financial companies but the vast majority of providers like me are hard-working family organisations run by people who deeply care about what they are doing.”



Wessex Care managing director Matthew Airey