

Streets against sepsis: trusting your instincts and advocating for your loved ones



Oliver in hospital with his younger sister

Over the course of the summer, there has been a storyline in *Coronation Street* where 7-year-old aspiring footballer Jack Webster develops sepsis after playing football with his sister. Jack is sent home but gets progressively worse until Ali, a locum doctor and friend of the Websters, suggests that it could be sepsis.

Without Ali, looking out for Jack, his story could have had a much sadder ending. To coincide with the storyline in *Coronation Street*, the UK Sepsis Trust have launched Streets Against Sepsis — our nationwide community-led campaign about bringing people together, raising awareness and encouraging people to advocate for each other.

Jack's story is fictional but, for Oliver Leather and his mother Victoria, the story was all too familiar.

When Oliver Leather, then 13, cut his knee during pre-season rugby training, the 1 cm gash on the inside of his left leg, caused by a player's stud, looked like a run-of-the-mill sports injury.

His father took him to Cheltenham General Hospital where he had a couple of stitches. The next day, Oliver's leg was sore and his mother, Victoria kept him at home in the village of Greet, Gloucestershire.

The wound became inflamed and over the course of that day, Oliver became irritable and belligerent. Victoria knew that this was very unusual for him and her mother's instinct kicked in. At the UK Sepsis Trust we urge people to trust their instincts: You know your friends and family; if you think something is wrong you are probably right.

At around 5pm, 43-year-old Victoria phoned the GP practice. It was just closing but she insisted Oliver see a doctor there and then. The GP was reluctant to prescribe antibiotics but Victoria insisted. That night, as Victoria sat in bed flicking through her Facebook feed, a post caught her eye. It was a video that Melissa Mead, a mother from Cornwall, made with the UK Sepsis Trust after her baby son William died from sepsis, 17 days after his first birthday.

Victoria was moved by the video but did not realise her own son was at that very moment succumbing to sepsis. The following morning, it was clear that Oliver was no better. He looked grey, the skin on his leg was mottled and he was beginning to run a temperature.

She was worried but didn't make the connection with sepsis and just kept thinking: Oliver's had antibiotics so it should be fine.'

However, Melissa's video kept preying on her mind, specifically the message to trust your instincts, seek medical help and keep pushing. Victoria later said 'I know in my heart of hearts I wouldn't have sought further medical advice that day if I hadn't watched the video. Without a doubt, it saved Oliver's life.'

Victoria's gut instinct told her that Oliver's extreme irritability was very unusual. She took Oliver back to the GP surgery and saw another doctor, who immediately called send him to paediatric A&E.

On the way to the hospital, Victoria phoned a friend who is a senior hospital registrar, who suspected sepsis. She went on to explain the importance of Sepsis 6, a protocol of six steps designed by the Sepsis Trust which doctors should follow within 30 minutes of a patient with suspected sepsis arriving in hospital.

At the hospital, Oliver's blood pressure and heart rate suddenly dropped and he briefly lost consciousness. A surgeon came straight away, and ordered two kinds of IV antibiotics — clindamycin and vancomycin — known as a drug of 'last resort' to treat severe sepsis. Oliver, now 15, said he could remember feeling 'illier than I have ever felt. I was sweating and in so much pain.'

A doctor marked the infection on Oliver's leg with a Sharpie pen. An area 5cm from the wound was turning green and purple and mottled. The texture of his skin seemed to be changing and throughout the night more red blotches kept appearing.

A few days later, with no change, doctors operated to remove the infected tissue around Oliver's knee, but it was another day before the infection began to recede. Oliver was in hospital for another four days, and it took six months to recover fully.

Victoria says that if she hadn't seen Melissa's video, she would have trusted oral antibiotics and would not have gone back to the GP and it could have been a very different outcome. Victoria and Oliver's story helped shape our Streets Against Sepsis campaign which is about raising awareness, bringing communities together and encouraging everyone to be able to 'just ask: could it be sepsis?'