

## Written evidence from petitioner Maria Lester

In August 2014, I lost my brave, brilliant brother Stephen Realf to brain cancer. Stephen was just 26, a trainee RAF pilot for whom not even the sky was the limit, yet his life was cut cruelly short by a tumour for which there was no cure – and no hope.

A year later, while writing an article about Stephen's story, I came across some stark statistics from Brain Tumour Research that broke my heart all over again. Until this point, like most people, I thought that brain tumours were exceptionally rare. I wasn't aware that they are the biggest cancer killer of children and young adults under 40, or that 16,000 people a year were being diagnosed with them. I didn't realise that they were on the rise, or that less than 20% of those diagnosed survived beyond 5 years. And I certainly had no idea that the funding situation was so dire – with brain tumours then receiving just 1.5% of the national spend on research into cancer.

And so the brain tumour petition was born.

The response exceeded all my expectations, as 120,129 people backed the call for more research, asking the Government and larger cancer charities to raise investment to £30-£35 million a year. A groundbreaking inquiry by the Petitions Committee sought evidence from experts, patients and families, before coming to the damning – yet inevitable – conclusion: ***'successive governments have failed brain tumour patients and their families for decades. The Government must now put this right.'***

Following a packed Westminster debate, and a 2018 promise from the Government to invest £40 million over five years, it finally felt like real progress was being made. It wasn't the £35 million a year we'd been campaigning for, but it was a big step in the right direction. A sea change. A shining example of democracy in action.

So you can imagine my disappointment when concerns began to be raised about the level of funding to date. My father Peter and I sought clarification from several sources, and the numbers we've been given have varied, so that is something it would be very helpful to confirm at this inquiry. However, whatever figures you look at, one thing is woefully clear: the Government is not on track to hit its £40 million pledge.

I fully appreciate that the Covid-19 crisis has resulted in unprecedented challenges, particularly for the Department of Health. But brain tumour patients have already been let down for decades – and with survival rates so low, they simply do not have time to wait. If the pandemic has taught us anything, it's that extraordinary medical breakthroughs can be rapidly achieved with proper funding. And if we could unlock a cure for brain tumours, who knows what insights that could yield for other cancers, too?

My experience as a petitioner has been a fascinating one, and it has been a privilege to be invited to the House of Commons and Whitehall. But ultimately, unless the pledged funds are forthcoming, we're not going to see a meaningful change.

I therefore call upon the Government to honour its commitment and invest the promised £40 million without further delay.

April 2021