



# Pip, Pop and a Pandemic



**Pip, Pop and a Pandemic** is a documentary about the lived experience of schizophrenia. The film follows two couples from the Northeast before, during, and after the pandemic. The result is a raw and emotional insight into the many serious problems that exist in our mental health care system.

Pauline and George



After learning that her PIP claim has been refused this is how Pauline reacts:

**“If you’ve got any kind of mental illness you’re not recognised in this country anymore – you’re told you’re surplus to requirements it’s literally that – you don’t have the right to be human anymore.”**

Fifteen months after her initial interview for PIP Pauline is finally granted the benefit on appeal due to a late-stage cancer diagnosis but sadly passes away four months later aged just 57. Her fiancé George also died two days before his 67th birthday in January this year. These outcomes unfortunately back up research that says people with serious mental health conditions have a life expectancy 15 to 20 years shorter than the general population.

Ed is a carer for his mentally ill wife. The couple are living in poverty surviving on Ed’s single person’s universal credit allowance of £411 per month. Catarina from Croatia has been told by the Home Office she is not entitled to benefits despite being married to Ed for 26 years and living in the UK for even longer.

Whilst attitudes to mental health have significantly improved in the last ten years, this documentary proves that the problem of stigma and discrimination against people with serious mental illnesses like schizophrenia still exists. During filming in lockdown, Ed and Catarina are chased by a gang of youths threatening to knife them and are scared to leave their flat for months. This was not an isolated incident.

In a Call to Action, I am asking parliamentarians to listen carefully to what Pauline and Ed have to say and to change the current system to one that truly supports the vulnerable living on the fringe of society. This is especially important with the announcement of plans to get more people off disability benefits and back into work. In terms of mental illness, a forceful approach could put vulnerable people at risk.

### **Tracy Willits**

Filmmaker

Senior Lecturer in Media Production,  
York St John University

## IMMEDIATE SIMPLE STEPS

Working with the Centre for Mental Health, families and support worker Lara Ellis, we've identified short-term suggestions that would significantly improve the lives of people with mental illness and their carers.

**Introduce specialist bookable appointments in appropriate locations with staff trained in helping to fill out the necessary forms such as PIP and carers allowance.**

- With PIP 48% have their application refused the first time round and as a consequence, their DLA is also stopped. 69% are successful on appeal for PIP but the process is drawn out. If the form is filled in correctly this should ensure the right decision about disability benefits is made the first time and will help avoid the need for costly and stressful appeals.

**People with serious mental illness should be carefully monitored by their GP:**

- GPs to encourage patients with serious mental health conditions such as schizophrenia to attend their annual health checkups.
- Introduce a GP Awareness campaign not to dismiss other health issues as side effects of the medication or presume symptoms are caused by anxiety due to mental illness.
- People on strong medication find it hard to get up at 8 a.m. to book a doctor's appointment. Make it easier for these patients to book appointments ahead of time and in the afternoon.

**Provide a trained and regular Welfare Adviser for people with long-term mental illness to avoid the stress of having to retell their background story to strangers on a regular basis at PIP appointments.**

- Encourage people to bring their carer or a family member to these meetings for support and give a choice whether to attend in person or on the phone.
- Hard-hitting online training/videos for Welfare Advisers explaining why people with severe mental illness may be unable to work with advice on how to handle such cases with compassion.

**GPs, nurses, and mental health professionals should actively seek out and encourage people to get assessed as carers.**

- Welfare Advisers at the job centre should actively encourage people to seek the help they are entitled to.
- If caring for a loved one means someone is unable to work, prioritise providing a consistent Welfare Adviser for carers at the Job Centre to avoid the stress of having to retell their background story on a regular basis at appointments.
- Introduce online training for Welfare Advisers explaining circumstances why carers may be unable to work and advise on how to handle such cases with compassion.



## CALL TO ACTION

- 1.** Commit to a strategy to reduce the large gap in life expectancy for people with a serious mental illness compared to the general population. The NHS has been aware of this for at least 10 years, but the situation continues to get worse due to a lack of investment in mental health services.
- 2.** Change the punitive culture within the benefits system and in job centres by creating a more compassionate approach that actively encourages people with disabilities and unpaid carers to seek out the financial support they need to live a better life.
- 3.** Commit to reducing the stigma of serious mental illness with an educational campaign aimed at health professionals, welfare advisors, and the wider public.
- 4.** Introduce measures to make sure that the 5 million unpaid carers in the UK are acknowledged and receive all the support and benefits they need and deserve. Carers save the government £162 billion per year.

For more information contact  
[t.willits@yorks.ac.uk](mailto:t.willits@yorks.ac.uk)  
[www.pipop.co.uk](http://www.pipop.co.uk)

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