

# Wounded UK soldiers criticise Help for Heroes charity

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The military charity Help for Heroes has been criticised by some of the UK's most badly wounded soldiers and their families for spending money on expensive buildings rather than everyday care.

The complaints were uncovered in a report by the BBC *Newsnight* programme and the Bureau of Investigative Journalism (BIJ) into state and charity provision for injured troops.

The investigation surveyed 902 military charities in England. With an annual income of almost £700 million, the BIJ calculated that the charities combined hold a £1 billion "war chest" of cash reserves.

According to the BIJ, "The total value of the military charity sector is likely to be greater than the figures suggest because hundreds of charities have not submitted full financial accounts to regulators. More than half of the charities analysed had only disclosed basic data, while some had failed to make any information available at all."

The *Newsnight* programme concentrated on Help for Heroes, probably the most high-profile charity raising funds for wounded soldiers.

It was established in October 2007 by Bryn Parry and his wife, Emma. Parry had served with the Royal Green Jackets for 10 years before leaving to become a cartoonist and is now the CEO of the charity. Help for Heroes was launched after a meeting with General Sir Richard Dannatt, then chief of the General Staff, the head of the British Army.

The proclaimed aim of Help for Heroes is "Supporting those wounded in the service of our country during recent conflicts." Its campaigns and money-raising events are a feature of life on Britain's high streets, pubs and social clubs in particular.

More than 600 UK soldiers have been killed in the wars and occupations of both Iraq and Afghanistan.

The number of wounded British soldiers from Afghanistan alone is now approaching 6,000. Some of these involve horrific brain injuries and multiple amputations.

Among the corporate trustees of Help for Heroes are Steve Harman, vice president of the oil conglomerate Shell, and Tony Schofield, a partner in the Consulting division of Deloitte, the world's second largest privately owned professional services firm.

The charity has attracted the support of much of the media, most notably the Murdoch-owned *The Sun* and the *Sunday Times*.

The rapid promotion of the charity, through a series of high-profile sporting and popular music events as well as supermarket product placement, has been consciously used to counter widespread anti-war sentiment. Bryn and Emma Parry were both awarded with the Order of the British Empire (OBE) in the Queen's Birthday Honours for their "services to charity" in November 2010.

The BBC *Newsnight*/BIJ investigation is the first public criticism of how the charity allocates funds from the £141 million it has raised to date. It shows how public sympathy for the fate of war veterans, many of whom are forced to rely on inadequate state and personal resources to deal with their injuries, are being cynically manipulated to fund Ministry of Defence projects.

*Newsnight* reported, "Recently discharged and serving wounded troops and their families said that, despite extra government money and the hundreds of millions of pounds raised by military charities every year, they are still not getting the help they need.

"The investigation has uncovered examples of wounded veterans having to pay for physiotherapy and for prosthetic limbs which meet their requirements and

reports of amputees with ill-fitting prostheses being told to pad their stumps with multiple pairs of socks.”

Help for Heroes is working on the construction and servicing of five regional Personnel Recovery Centres in Plymouth, Colchester, Catterick, Edinburgh and Tidworth, Wiltshire that are part of the government’s Defence Recovery Capability. But injured soldiers and their families contacted for the investigation complained that the charity was subsidising multimillion-pound MoD projects, when funds were urgently needed for practical everyday help and care for injured service personnel and veterans.

The claim was also made that PRCs are not always available to injured veterans who have left the armed forces.

Former Royal Marine Ben McBean, a double amputee and one of the patrons of Help for Heroes, was interviewed by the programme.

McBean is black, but during initial treatment following his injury, he had originally been issued with a white hand. He had ended up paying £7,000 of his own money to replace his prosthetic.

McBean said he is the recipient of thousands of angry e-mails and letters from veterans and their families directed at conduct of the charity.

The charity’s flagship project is a PRC at the eighteenth century Grade II stately home, Tedworth House, in Wiltshire.

Help for Heroes is leasing the building from the MoD at a reported nominal rent of £1 a year for 99 years. In return, the charity is spending more than £20 million in renovations. These include replacing intricate plasterwork, an orangery, relaying cobblestone floors, and cleaning and polishing stained glass windows, chandeliers and statues.

Tedworth and other PRCs are primarily for serving personnel. Veterans can only get continuing treatment on a case-by-case basis.

McBean said he had no access to the PRCs. Accusing the charities of “getting cosy with the MoD”, he complained, “Rather than £100 million being spent on limbs for every single guy who has been injured, and the future, instead the MoD somehow managed to get all these Gucci buildings out of it.”

Diane Dernie is the mother of Lance Bombardier Ben Parkinson, 27. Parkinson is Britain’s most wounded soldier to survive his injuries, having lost both his legs,

broken his back, hips and ribs and suffered brain damage in Afghanistan in 2006. Parkinson, with assistance, recently carried the Olympic torch in Doncaster.

Diane Dernie questioned the priorities in the allocation of funds by Help for Heroes.

“We find it difficult to see these buildings, these edifices that are being paid for by charity,” she said. “If there’s building work, if there’s need for a location then that should be the MoD’s responsibility.”

The BBC cited the case of Harris Tatakis, a former corporal in the Royal Marines, who received multiple injuries in an Improvised Explosive Device (IED) blast. He was discharged just over a year ago and tried to get back into his recovery centre in Plymouth after months without treatment, but says he was turned away by the MoD.

“I’m on the doorstep of the recovery centre and it’s a shut door,” he said. “Once you’re discharged, they’re not there for you anymore, they’re there for the next injured serviceman coming in.”

Tatakis eventually had to pay for his own twice-weekly physiotherapy sessions, but said that after a year he could no longer afford it.

“I gave 13 years of my life to serving and I just feel like the moment you’re injured that’s it, you’re seen as a burden.

“You feel throughout you’re having to beg to get what you want, or to get fixed. It’s a very degrading process to go through. It’s like having to beg for treatment, for pain relief and I hate that position that they put me in,” he said.



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