

Death rates are too high at 16 NHS hospital trusts, analysts claim

By Laura Donnelly
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SIXTEEN NHS hospital trusts in England have higher than expected death rates, national figures show.

The number is down from 20 the previous year, said Dr Foster, a respected health statistics analysis company. But it found that 13 trusts did badly on at least half the main indicators relating to patient deaths.

There is increasing concern about mortality rates at some hospitals, following an inquiry earlier this year into 14 trusts.

That inquiry, by Prof Sir Bruce Keogh, the NHS medical director, led to 11 hospitals being put on "special measures" amid concern about low staffing levels and trusts accused of failing to care for patients safely.

Five of the trusts identified by Dr Foster were part of Sir Bruce's investigation.

In all, 237,100 patients died in hospital in England and Wales in 2012-13, the new figures show. That was 4,400 more patients than the previous year but 5,300 fewer than in 2010-11. "While the number of people who are dying in hospital has risen slightly since last year it is still a

much more improved picture than in the 10 years previous," said Roger Taylor, Dr Foster's director of research.

"This year, following the inquiry in Mid Staffordshire, the NHS has renewed its efforts to tackle avoidable mortality resulting from failures in health care."

He said there were fewer hospitals where deaths were a lot higher than average. Overall, the report showed that 28 trusts had lower than expected in-hospital death rates. Furthermore, more trusts did well on two or more of the death rate indicators than did badly.

The report also suggests that surgery for knees, hips and eyes is under pressure across the NHS, with evidence of rationing to save money. Some operations are at their lowest level for several years.

The number of knee operations had been rising since 2002, against a background of an ageing population, but fell for the first time last year. In 2011, there were 82,122 operations, dropping to 81,572 in 2012. The number of cataract operations started dropping in 2009 and last year's 321,957 was thousands fewer than in 2008.

A spokesman for Dr Foster said it was likely that patients who would have been

given an operation in the past either do not qualify or may have to wait for their condition to get worse.

Steve Winyard, of the RNIB, said: "It is scandalous that some commissioners continue to restrict access to cataract surgery through the use of arbitrary thresholds. This postcode lottery is simply unacceptable."

Katherine Murphy, the chief executive of the Patients Association, said: "Those responsible for making harsh decisions in order to satisfy their financial directors and boards should remember that patients are in pain but yet their operations are being cancelled."

An NHS England spokesman said: "This report highlights some encouraging signs of improvement. But there is no room for complacency."

□ *The trusts with higher than expected death rates were: Blackpool, Medway, North Cumbria, Northern Lincolnshire and Goole, and United Lincolnshire hospital trusts, which were part of Sir Bruce's investigation; and Burton Hospitals, George Eliot, Heart of England, Mid Cheshire, North Tees and Hartlepool, Northumbria, Salisbury, Sherwood Forest, South Tees, University Hospitals Birmingham, and West Hertfordshire Hospitals trust.*