

# Labour's bid to cover up NHS death rate scandal

LABOUR has been accused of trying to cover up a warning over high death rates and lengthy waiting times at hospitals in Wales.

In newly-released emails, officials are revealed to have tried to suppress the warning by claiming the information they contained would 'prejudice the conduct of public affairs'.

Bureaucrats in the Cardiff government argued that if the warnings from Sir Bruce Keogh, the NHS medical director in England, to Welsh counterpart Dr Chris Jones were made public the two men might be too scared to communicate in future.

Joanna Jordan, the director of corporate and legal services at the devolved Welsh government, wrote that disclosure of the records could undermine a 'safe space' in which the directors could talk confidentially.

The original warning email from Sir Bruce said mortality rates at

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six NHS sites in Wales were 'persistently high' and criticised 'worrying' waits for cancer tests.

But it was only uncovered when it was released under Freedom of Information laws.

Yesterday Conservative MP Charlotte Leslie accused the Labour government in Wales of being 'committed to cover-ups'.

She added: 'If it was not for Sir Bruce Keogh, this evidence of potentially fatal diagnostic waiting times and high mortality rates would probably have been hidden from the public to protect political careers.'

And Welsh Assembly member Darren Millar said: 'The Labour ministers in the Welsh government have been caught red-handed trying to cover up concerns from England's most senior clinician about high death rates in Welsh hospitals and exces-

sively long waiting times. The 2013 data shows that every hospital in Wales, bar three, has a death rate above the England and Wales average, yet Labour ministers wanted to keep it all hush-hush.'

He added: 'If anywhere else in the UK had death rates as high as some of those in Wales, there would have been a Mid Staffs-style investigation by now.'

The NHS budget in England has been protected from cuts, but the Welsh government have slashed its health service spending by 8 per cent since 2009. Almost 50 per cent of patients now wait six weeks or more for vital scans and tests to diagnose cancer compared with a 1 per cent figure in England.

Welsh Labour health ministers have also rejected Tony Blair's policy of allowing private sector firms to carry out some NHS treatment - a move which has been credited with bringing down waiting times.