

Families 'deceived' over care reform

Ministers accused of giving false hope that changes would

be made to avoid repeat of Winterbourne View scandal

By John Bingham, Social Affairs Editor

FAMILIES of victims of the Winterbourne View scandal have accused ministers of giving them false hope that their loved ones' suffering would lead to change in the care of vulnerable disabled people.

In a letter to *The Daily Telegraph*, they warned that "the scandal continues" almost four years after abuse at the former private hospital near Bristol was exposed in an undercover BBC *Panorama* documentary.

A report into the official response to the scandal has found that a government pledge to move patients with learning disabilities and behavioural problems out of unsuitable Winterbourne View-style institutions back into the community was unrealistic from the start.

The National Audit Office (NAO) found that the Department of Health announced the target, originally set for July of last

year, without checking whether it was possible or even knowing how many people it would affect.

A new, scaled-down goal of halving the numbers in such settings by April this year also has little prospect of success, it found.

The NAO said such aims were "unlikely" to be achieved without major changes to ensure different bodies within the care system worked together.

The admission is a blow to the families who said the promise that other disabled people would not languish in unsuitable mental health units designed only for short stays, often hundreds of miles from home, had helped them carry on.

The letter was signed by relatives of four former Winterbourne View residents and 10 others with loved-ones in similar institutions, as well as Jan Tregelles, chief executive of Mencap, and Vivien Cooper, chief executive of the Challenging Behav-

our Foundation. "The Government assured us, and the charities supporting us, places like Winterbourne View would be closed down, but nearly four years on we are now seeing more people going into these kinds of units than are coming out," they wrote. "For so many of us, it was the

'Our hope that the suffering of our loved ones would lead to change kept us going. But the scandal continues'

hope that the suffering of our loved ones would lead to change and stop the suffering of others that kept us going. However, the scandal continues."

The scandal in May 2011 shone a spotlight on how councils had come to see

temporary treatment and assessment centres effectively as a permanent solution for some patients with complex needs.

Despite the closure of Winterbourne itself and promises of a new approach, the number of in-patients in mental health hospitals remains static at about 2,600 and has risen in recent months.

"The Government did not have a detailed analysis of the scope to accelerate patients' treatment programmes or to hasten their readiness for discharge," the NAO said.

"Without this data on the cohort of inpatients covered by the commitments, the Government and NHS England did not know the scale of the task, and the hospital resources required, in preparing to discharge patients by June 1 2014."

Even now, the NHS's estimate of how many such patients there are is nearly 20 per cent out because of double counting,

it found. The NAO, which examined patient records in detail, found errors in 70 per cent of the files. It also noted that patients had spent an average of almost seven years continuously in inpatient settings and more than 17 years on and off.

Norman Lamb, the care minister, promised to "redouble" efforts, admitting: "We have not gone nearly far enough fast enough." Margaret Hodge, chairman of the Commons public accounts committee, said she was "appalled" at the lack of progress.

Mr Lamb said: "I am looking at legislative options to give people with learning disabilities and their families a stronger voice and more rights and I'm looking at how we can increase specialised housing options, so that more people can live independently but with the support that they need."