

# NHS failing to care for dying outside hours, charities warn

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HOSPITALS are abandoning dying patients at nights and weekends, with “unacceptable” failures by the NHS to provide proper end-of-life care around the clock, experts say.

The warning was issued by a coalition of doctors and charities as figures showed just one in 10 NHS hospitals offers expert care to the dying on a 24/7 basis.

The heads of the Royal College of Physicians (RCP), Marie Curie and the Association of Palliative Medicine said far more needed to be done to ensure those facing death were given the comfort, support and pain relief needed.

Prof Sam Ahmedzai, who led an audit by the RCP on care of the dying, said hospitals were making too many excuses when they were letting patients down. The audit of 142 NHS trusts found that just 37 per cent were able to offer specialist palliative care between nine to five on a seven-day basis, while just 11 per cent managed to provide it around the clock.

Prof Ahmedzai, who recently wrote NHS guidelines on care of the dying, said: “I am really concerned about all the services which don’t have this available 24/7 or even seven days a week.

“Why can’t most of our hospitals even manage this?” he said. “I hear excuses but we cannot walk away from our dying patients at night.”

In a letter to *The Sunday Telegraph*, palliative care experts said it was “unacceptable” that patients were not able to secure the right care round the clock. Professor Jane Dacre, president of the RCP, Dr Jane Collins, chief executive of Marie Curie, and John McGrath, chairman of Cicely Saunders International,

are among those calling for the NHS to invest more in expert care to help the dying, recruiting and training more staff in specialist skills.

“There are nowhere near enough palliative care doctors and nurses to provide a 24/7 service across the whole of the UK – we only have one palliative care consultant and five palliative care nurses per 1,000 beds,” they wrote.

Crossbench peer Baroness Finlay, professor of palliative medicine at Cardiff University, has called for a legal duty to be placed on all health commissioners to ensure specialist palliative care is available seven days a week.

Her Access to Palliative Care Bill would also have required all commissioners to provide appropriate support and advice for patients at the end of life and their families. The legislation passed the House of Lords but has not received Government support in the Commons.

Delivering the Cicely Saunders International Annual Lecture on Wednesday, she lambasted the “postcode lottery” of palliative care provision in England.

A separate study by the End of Life Care coalition, a group of seven charities including Marie Curie and Cicely Saunders International, says almost 50,000 people per year receive poor care in their last three months of life.

The coalition called for training for all health care professionals to help them support dying patients, and for an increase in the proportion of the medical research budget dedicated to developing better ways of caring for terminally ill people and their families. Only 0.1 per cent of medical research budgets is spent on this, they said.

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