

Unacceptable pain

It should go without saying that it is not acceptable for the NHS to leave some dying patients without care, support or pain relief simply because their final hours happen to come at night or during a weekend. Yet that is precisely the situation described today by senior doctors and charities in a letter to this newspaper.

The experts note that the root of the problem is a shortage of specialist staff during these times. Obviously, the long-term answer is to train and employ more such staff, and ministers have set out plans to increase the number of doctors in the coming years.

More immediately, though, this observation is worth considering in the light of the Government's dispute with the British Medical Association, the doctors' trade union. Ministers want junior doctors to work more weekends, to deliver the "seven-day NHS" they promised in their manifesto. In resisting this perfectly sensible aim, many doctors cite studies they say prove that patients admitted at weekends, when there are fewer staff at work, are no more likely to die than during the week. If there is no "weekend effect" on mortality rates, they suggest, there is no need for the seven-day working that ministers are seeking.

The BMA and its advocates would do well to consider today's warning about palliative care, for it is a reminder that the NHS does not just exist to keep people alive but to give them the best possible quality of life, right until the end. If the absence of doctors at weekends is leaving dying patients in unnecessary pain and distress, can the trade union really argue that there is no need for its members to accept the working patterns that the Government has set out?

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