

Complaints soar as elderly are failed by social care services

Rosemary Bennett
Social Affairs Correspondent

Complaints about care workers not showing up to the homes of their elderly patients, cutting short visits, or treating their clients with a lack of respect or neglect have risen by a quarter in the past year.

Jane Martin, the local government ombudsman who deals with the most intractable disputes about elderly care, said in her annual report that she had received 2,696 complaints overall in the year to March, up 6 per cent on the year before.

However, she drew attention to the particularly large increase in complaints regarding care in the home, up 25 per cent in the period. Complaints about standards in care homes also rose sharply, up 20 per cent.

Frail elderly people who live on their own are particularly vulnerable when care falls short. The ombudsman said reliability and consistency were crucial to give them a decent quality of life.

Among the complaints was the case of "Margaret", an elderly woman with only weeks to live. She had 24-hour live-in care but died half-undressed in a chair in soiled clothing after the carer put her there for a break from bed, then failed to turn her call button on.

The annual report also cited the case

Most common complaints

2014-15		2015-16
497	Poor residential care	599
297	Poor home care	372
46	Supported living	57
576	Assessment and care planning	600
262	Charging	278
258	Safeguarding	223

Source: local authority ombudsman

of "David", an elderly man with vascular dementia and heart problems who was normally cared for at home. Within days of being transferred to residential care for a respite break, he was admitted to hospital because no one at the home had monitored his fluid intake, a vital element of dementia care.

Dr Martin said that the complaints she upheld were often less serious than that. However, when someone lives alone and depends on outside care, small things really matter. "Our complaints show that for people receiving care in their homes, it's often the little things that mean so much to them in maintaining their dignity, independence and a good quality of life. Consistency

of care is vital to those who rely on these services," she said.

"Respect for individual preferences around food and drink, what to wear and when to get up and go to bed are important to any individual and become emphasised when a person is not able to do these things independently."

The ombudsman is the tribunal of last resort when families have had no resolution with the care home, care providers or local authority when they have brought a complaint. Two thirds of complaints about care in the home were upheld, suggesting the companies providing the care or local authority arranging it should accept blame for mistakes themselves and make amends.

The bulk of disputes involved disagreements over local authority assessment of the care needs of frail elderly people in their area, and planning for them. Typically a dispute would involve the local authority refusing to fund care altogether or only part funding it, leaving the family with the rest of the bill. ● A nursing home has been fined £100,000 after staff failed to cut a vulnerable pensioner's dinner into small pieces and she choked to death. Margaret Humphreys died aged 84 after trying to eat meatballs that had not been sliced by care home staff at Marlborough House in Fleet, Hampshire.

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