

NHS contractor lost 700,000 letters

Chris Smyth Health Editor

More than 1,700 patients may have suffered after an NHS contractor failed to own up to losing 700,000 letters and test results, an “utterly damning” report reveals.

Managers shifted the documents “out of sight”, destroyed many of them and delayed taking serious action for two years, while ministers did not admit to the problems for months, according to National Audit Office findings that led to accusations of a cover-up.

Hundreds of the most seriously affected patients have died and while the watchdog says there is no direct evidence of harm, investigations are still taking place into 175,000 patients.

Blood test results, cancer screening appointments, medication changes and child protection notes were among

708,000 pieces of clinical correspondence found to have been dumped in storerooms when the scandal first emerged this year.

Today’s NAO report lays bare how the problem was allowed to worsen over six years amid foot-dragging, bickering between NHS bodies and attempts to downplay the problem.

It reveals that 1,788 cases of potential harm have been identified, with 333 of these patients having died. Although reviews have found no direct evidence that delays to correspondence led to the deaths, the NAO says that possible harm is likely to be uncovered because 175,000 documents have yet to be studied. Reviewing the unsent letters has cost £6.6 million, not including any fines by the Information Commissioner or compensation payments.

NHS Shared Business Services, an

outsourcing company owned jointly by the Department of Health and the private consultancy Sopra Steria, was contracted across parts of the country to handle GP correspondence and inherited 8,146 unprocessed letters in 2011. Today’s report shows how little was done as the backlog mounted steadily.

Although managers knew about the risk to patients in January 2014, nothing was done to deal with the missing files until December 2015 because they were considered “just filing”.

A junior employee who tried to warn that the files were being “shifted out of sight” was told that there were no staff to process the backlog. Soon afterwards 35 sacks of records were destroyed without clear checks, the NAO found.

The documents were stored in a room labelled “clinical notes” but a manager removed that label because

“you don’t want to advertise what’s in that room”.

NHS England claimed that the outsourcing company was “obstructive and unhelpful” in dealing with the problem and although ministers were informed in March last year, they opted not to tell parliament at the time because they did not want to cause “unnecessary worry”.

Richard Vautrey of the British Medical Association said: “It is a disgrace that this service failed so badly that patient care was being compromised.”

NHS Shared Business Services said: “We regret this situation and have co-operated fully with the National Audit Office in its investigation. All of the correspondence backlog has now been delivered to GP surgeries for filing and NHS England has so far found no evidence of patient harm.”