

# Autistic children are routinely restrained and drugged in care

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Autistic children as young ten are being detained and subjected to chemical and physical restraint hundreds of times a month, two reports will say next week.

Ministers are braced for fresh revelations about the inappropriate treatment of children with learning disabilities more than six years after Jeremy Hunt, when health secretary, pledged to end the "normalisation of cruelty" in parts of the care system.

One report from the children's commissioner reveals that in a single month last year 75 children were restrained 820 times, an average of 11 per child.

In another report the Care Quality Commission is expected to reveal children and adults being subjected to long periods of prolonged seclusion and segregation in secure and rehabilitation mental health wards.

The CQC report was commissioned by Mr Hunt's successor, Matt Hancock, after revelations of abuse in mental health institutions seven years after Winterbourne View care home scandal in Gloucestershire which resulted in six workers jailed for abuse and neglect.

One Whitehall source said that the CQC's findings, like those of the children's commissioner, would reveal widespread and regular use of "inhumane" techniques to control both adult and child patients. "It is not going to reflect well on anyone," they said.

Anne Longfield, the children's commissioner, will outline how:

- Staff in mental health units used physical restraint on young patients 585 times in a single month last year.
- There were another 115 incidents of chemical restraint recorded and 95 cases where children were placed in seclusion.
- Some 20 per cent of the children who were being restrained were under 14.

## Case study

**T**he inquiry into the use of restraint, seclusion and segregation of people with autism, a learning disability or a mental illness was prompted by the detention of Bethany, then 17, in a cell-like room (Greg Hurst writes).

Bethany, whose surname cannot be published for legal reasons, has autism and suffers from extreme anxiety. She was kept in seclusion for 21 months at St Andrew's hospital in Northampton, locked in a room with only a mattress and chair, and was given meals through a hatch in a

metal door. Staff at the psychiatric hospital, which is run by a healthcare charity facing sustained criticism over the high pay of former executives, said she was aggressive and self-harmed.

An assessment had concluded that the hospital was not able to meet Bethany's individual care needs and recommended that she be treated in the community with a high level of bespoke support, rather than as an in-patient, but attempts to discharge her broke down.

Her father, Jeremy, from Harborne, Birmingham, overturned an

attempt by Walsall council to prevent him from highlighting the conditions in which she was held as part of a campaign to secure her transfer to be treated in the community.

The council, which was legally responsible for Bethany because she was detained under the Mental Health Act as a potential risk to herself or others, claimed that it wanted to restrict the publication of information that could identify her. Her father then began legal proceedings against the council, NHS England, and St Andrew's Healthcare.

spent between two and five years in a mental health institution while a further 45 had been detained for between one and two years.

Ms Longfield said that too many children were being admitted to hospital unnecessarily and some were needlessly spending far too long in institutions.

"I will never forget the stories I heard from mums and dads at a meeting I arranged for parents with children in these units and their tears of frustration and anger," she said.

Norman Lamb, a care minister in the coalition government, described the situation as an "ongoing scandal". "Serious child abuse is endemic in the system and the government is complicit in that child abuse," he said.

Mr Hancock ordered the CQC, which regulates health and social care services in England, to review the use of restrictive practices on in-patient wards and in residential care homes. It came after *The Times* highlighted the detention of Bethany, then 17, for almost a year in a bare cell-like room with food passed through a hatch.

One NHS source said the CQC inquiry would conclude that such examples were "far from isolated cases".

Dan Scorer of Mencap said: "Despite the government launching its Transforming Care programme to get people with learning disabilities out of inappropriate inpatient units nearly seven years ago, children continue to be detained in these modern-day asylums."

An NHS spokesman, said: "NHS staff are working closely with patients, families, councils and education services to get appropriate and high quality care to young people with complex and challenging health needs as early as possible, investing in community care and avoiding the need for intensive inpatient treatment".

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Inspectors visited units where children were detained and spoke to their relatives. They found that some children had put on a great deal of weight due to poor diet and the side-effects of medication. Dental and eye checks had not been completed and one family told inspectors that their son had not been washed for six months while in hospital.

Inspectors said that rather than being a last resort staff spoke of using restraint techniques "as almost a matter of routine".

A sister of one patient described watching her brother being restrained. "They were restraining him and con-

stantly injecting him in his leg and his bum," she said. "He'd get a bruise on his leg because they kept injecting him in the same place. If he shouted at them, or turned away from them they would come and restrain him, inject him and lock him in his bedroom." When the medication took effect he was "away with the fairies", she said.

The report highlighted the failure of health officials to create care plans that would allow children to live at home. Fifteen children had not had a review of their plan in the last year while further 80 had not had their needs assessed for at least three months. Ten children had