

Elderly care home residents 'being left to die from coronavirus by ageist GPs'

Care homes

Sector desperately needs mass testing and personal protective equipment, claims chief executive

By Tom Morgan

CORONAVIRUS has exposed a culture of "ageism" in the UK, according to the chief of Care England, who says some elderly residents were effectively being left to die by GPs.

Prof Martin Green, chief executive of the body representing the independent care sector, claims he has seen a letter from one doctor telling a home that its residents would not be admitted to hospital.

The unidentified GP was said to have been reported to authorities and spoken to, but Prof Green suggested it reflected a wider culture of discrimination against the elderly. Earlier this week, NHS England sent out a letter insisting virus victims must be treated on a case-by-case basis.

"We've seen some ageist behaviour and it's been from GPs who, for exam-

ple, have said to some care homes, 'Well, first of all, I'm not coming in, and secondly we are not going to send anyone to hospital,'" Prof Green told *The Daily Telegraph*.

"That sort of thing is really unacceptable. Can you imagine if I was a GP and picked up the phone and said no black person with sickle cell [a disorder of haemoglobin in red blood cells] is allowed to go to hospital because their immune system is compromised? All hell would break loose. We've got a bit of an ageist society and that has really manifested itself in this pandemic."

There are more than 400,000 residents in care homes in England alone, but it will be months before the death toll among them from Covid-19 is known, Prof Green said.

His concerns were expressed after the Alzheimer's Society said at least half of care homes were reporting cases of the virus, and tens of thousands of dementia patients risk being "abandoned".

Prof Green and the charity sector say care homes desperately need mass testing and adequate personal protective equipment (PPE) to avoid a potentially huge death toll.

The Local Government Association

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yesterday said it was "pressing the Government" to address the shortage, particularly of PPE. London and the Midlands - where the outbreak has surged fastest - have been worst affected by shortages.

Prof Green said the Government will ultimately save money by dedicating more help to support care home residents, both young and old, via testing.

"With the right testing, with the right conditions, they can manage these conditions to keep care home residents out of hospital," he said.

"I think the mortality rate will be dependent on how much focus is placed on care homes, how much testing takes place, how much PPE is provided. It doesn't have to get to 30 per cent if we prepare and put in the appropriate protection and equipment."

He said the letter he had seen from a GP was "completely unacceptable".

"The letter was from a doctor to a care home," he added. "The practitioner has been spoken to. I don't think they've been disciplined. I think it's an isolated case of someone actually writing a letter, but I'm not sure it's an isolated practice."

An official with knowledge of the case involving the GP said a "clumsily-

worded letter had been misinterpreted".

Sources close to NHS England, meanwhile, said Prof Green's claim of ageism was "fundamentally wrong".

In a letter sent out to all GPs and NHS Trusts on Tuesday, NHS England wrote: "The key principle is that each person is an individual whose needs and preferences must be taken account of individually. By contrast blanket policies are inappropriate whether due to medical condition, disability, or age.

"This is particularly important in regard to 'do not attempt cardiopulmonary resuscitation' (DNACPR) orders, which should only ever be made on an individual basis and in consultation with the individual or their family."

Kathryn Smith, of the Alzheimer's Society, said earlier this week that "elderly people in care homes are being forgotten".

"It is disgraceful we are not getting any tests," she said. "We feel invisible."

A one-off emergency drop of PPE is in the process of being delivered to local resilience forums across the country, but, according to the LGA, it will not currently be enough to meet demand.