

A&E crisis: NHS posts worst waiting time figures in a decade

News Article



Photo: Health Secretary, Jeremy Hunt

Health Secretary Jeremy Hunt says there is a 'huge amount of pressure' on the NHS in England and hospital bosses feel they are 'running just to keep still'

Accident and Emergency departments have had their worst performance in a decade according to new official figures.

Statistics from all NHS hospital trusts show that in the last three months, 92.6 per cent of patients were seen within four hours.

It is the worst figure since records started in 2004. Until now the worst quarterly performance was in spring 2013.

The new figures from NHS England show record numbers of patients enduring long trolley waits.

In the two weeks over Christmas, 20,962 Accident and Emergency patients waited up to 12 hours on trolleys – almost four times as many as the 5,573 over the same period last year.

The official statistics show that in the last three months, more than 90,000 Accident and Emergency patients waited up to 12 hours on trolleys.

The figure is the highest in a decade – and more than 40 per cent higher than the last recorded high, in spring 2013.

Dr Cliff Mann, President of the College of Emergency Medicine, said the figures showed "a very disturbing pattern". He said "all bets are off" about how the NHS would cope as winter continues, with the period between January and March traditionally proving the toughest for health services.

Dr Mann said the essential problem was that hospitals were "full to bursting" and housing far too many patients who should have been sent home, but were not, because there were no help available to care for them in the community.

He said: "There are thousands of patients in hospital who simply do not want or need to be there; the problems we are seeing now are almost entirely because of delayed discharges, and patients in beds who should have been sent home, with the right help."

The figures for the last three months show 174 patients waited more than 12 hours in A&E - another record high.

The new figures show that in Christmas week just 90.5 per cent of A&E patients were seen within four hours.

The Government target is that 95 per cent should be seen within the timescale.

In the week ending December 21, more than 12,000 patients spent up to 12 hours on trolleys in A&E, while 49 waited still longer.

Until now, the highest recorded figure for the same week was 2,840.

Crucially the data also shows that performance over the last three months has been consistently far worse than ever before, while the numbers of patients being

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admitted as an emergency case has reached a record high.

The figures show that in the last quarter there were 1.4 million emergency admissions. Until now the highest figure was in April to June of last year, when there were 1.37 million people admitted as emergencies.

The NHS data for the last quarter of 2014 shows:

* 90,388 patients waited between four and 12 hours in A&E - the highest number on record;

* They included 174 patients who stayed more than 12 hours in casualty

Until now, the highest recorded quarterly figure for trolley waits of up to 12 hours was 63,917 in January to March 2013, with 150 cases waiting longer.

* Overall, 92.6 of patients were treated or discharged within four hours in the last quarter - the worst performance on record.

Dr Mark Porter, British Medical Association council chairman, said: "Patients should be treated on the basis of need, rather than arbitrary targets, but these figures show the NHS is under unprecedented levels of pressure. Staff are working flat out but the system is struggling to cope with the sheer number of patients coming through the door. Growing pressure on services throughout the year means hospitals have no spare capacity to deal with the winter spike in demand."

NHS statistics were released on Tuesday for the two weeks ending December 28th.

Before Christmas, Labour attacked the Government for delaying their publication, with figures normally published each week. However, the Health Secretary pointed out that Labour never published weekly figures, and also suspended the publication of the data they did publish over the festive period.

It comes as doctors warn that many hospitals are "full to bursting" with more patients than beds.

In recent days, nine A&E units have declared "major incidents" as they became unable to cope with unprecedented pressures on services.

Health officials have warned of rising pressures on services, amid a rising elderly population.

Each day, an extra 2,000 A&E patients are seen within four hours, compared with 2010. But each day around 1,000 patients a day are also stuck in hospital although they are medically fit to be discharged, official statistics show.

In the autumn the Health Secretary announced a £300m injection in funding to help NHS services cope with winter pressures.

Mr Hunt said he was expecting a "significant improvement" in waiting times as a result of the extra funding.

Health officials said the £300 million injection, on top of £400 million previously announced, means trusts can pay for the equivalent of 1,000 extra doctors, 2,000 extra nurses and create up to 2,500 extra beds. Mr Hunt warned then that pressures on hospitals were now "higher than they have ever been before," with a three to four per cent rise in emergency admissions year on year.

Figures show nearly a million more people will be over 65 at the end of the Parliament than there were at the beginning.

Health officials have drawn up long-term plans to redesign the system, to improve access to GPs at weekends, and improve care for the elderly at home, reducing pressure on hospitals.

Mr Hunt said there is a "huge amount of pressure" on the NHS in England and hospital bosses feel they are "running just to keep still" to cope with rising demand.

He said the fact that nine out of 10 patients were being seen within four hours, which was "better than any other country in the world".

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The pressure on hospitals has led to a number of trusts declaring major incidents in order to cope with a surge in patients.

Andy Burnham, shadow health secretary, said: "These figures confirm the serious deterioration in the NHS under this Government but reveal, more worryingly, a dangerous slump in A&E performance in recent weeks.

"We have repeatedly warned David Cameron's to get a grip on the growing crisis in A&E and ambulances services. He has failed to do so and has now left patients all over England exposed to unacceptable levels of risk."

He criticised Mr Hunt for an email, sent by officials yesterday, which asked NHS trusts to provide ideas about how to tackle levels of delayed discharges in hospitals, with a four-hour deadline to do so.

Mr Burnham said on Tuesday: "It beggars belief that, only yesterday, on the day when hospitals were declaring major incidents, Jeremy Hunt was asking officials to email hospitals asking for ideas in four bullet-points on how to solve the winter crisis. There could be no clearer illustration of the Government's failure to plan and get ahead of the very serious situation in which the NHS now finds itself. It smacks of panic when what is needed is planning and leadership."

He said the crisis in A&E had "has its roots in the Government's cuts to social care and GP access and its disastrous decision to throw the NHS into the chaos of reorganisation."

Mr Hunt told the BBC Radio 4 Today programme: "There is a huge amount of pressure, that's absolutely clear."

But he added: "I think we also have to recognise, despite the particular pressures, despite the major incidents - and you always get some major incidents at this time of year - that the NHS is continuing to see in A&E departments nine out of 10 people within the

four-hour target.

"That is actually better than any other country in the world that measures these things."

Mr Hunt stressed that maintaining patient safety was more important than meeting targets.

"We want to do better than that, and we want to do everything we can, but what we don't want to do ... is for trusts to make compromises, as has happened in the past, on patient safety, on compassionate care, just in order to hit the targets.

"Targets matter, but not at any cost."

The Health Secretary said "some progress" was being made in recruiting more clinical staff, but he acknowledged the frustration felt by those running hospital trusts.

"Although capacity is expanding, there is a sense of running just to keep still because the demand at the front door continues to increase at an even greater rate," he said.

Mr Hunt's Liberal Democrat colleague, Norman Lamb, admitted the NHS "is not meeting" its targets. Speaking to ITV's Good Morning Britain, Mr Lamb said Britain's ageing population means hospitals are having to treat older patients with chronic conditions.

He said: "We rightly have the toughest targets in the developed world. We are not meeting them.

"We are living longer, the pressures of people living with chronic conditions. We hear lots of reports from A&E departments of older people particularly turning up more ill than they have in the past."

A surge in demand at emergency departments has forced several hospital trusts to activate major incident plans. Gloucester Royal, Cheltenham General Hospital, Scarborough Hospital and the University Hospitals of North Midlands in Staffordshire have implemented the emergency measure.

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Dr Sarah Pinto-Duschinsky, director of operations and delivery for NHS England, said: "Today's figures show that, in the three months to the end of December, more than nine out of 10 A&E patients in England continued to be seen and treated in under four hours - the best measured performance of any major Western country.

"In the immediate run-up to Christmas, the NHS treated 446,500 A&E attendees, up 38,000 on the same week last year.

"And there were 112,600 emergency admissions - the highest number in a single week since we started publishing performance figures in 2010."



Worst performance against the NHS target to see A&E patients in four hours:

- Cambridge University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust 66%
- Colchester Hospital University NHS Foundation Trust 73%
- Hull And East Yorkshire Hospitals NHS Trust 73.5%
- Stockport NHS Foundation Trust 73.8%
- University Hospitals Of North Midlands NHS Trust 74.3%
- Wye Valley NHS Trust 75%
- Portsmouth Hospitals NHS Trust 76.4%
- South Devon Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust 77.4%
- The Princess Alexandra Hospital NHS Trust 77.6%
- South Tyneside NHS Foundation Trust 78%

Figures, NHS England, week ending December 28, 2014

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