999 failures' linked to rise in avoidable patient deaths

Oliver Moody

Scores of people died last year in incidents linked to serious alleged failings by ambulance staff, according to new figures that reveal the scale of the pressure on 999 services across England.

Shortages of funding and trained paramedics, coupled with a near doubling in demand over the past decade, have led some services to warn that they are struggling to cope. Thousands of people in the most urgent category of emergency were left waiting more than an hour for an ambulance, while the services carried out 344 investigations into serious failures in 12 months.

Among these cases were at least 59 'unexpected or avoidable" deaths, according to data obtained by The Times under Freedom of Information rules, although not all were ruled to be the fault of the ambulance services. The real figure is likely to be higher, as four of the country's ten biggest ambulance trusts did not release numbers. In Janu-

Call numbers

Ambulance

response to

England & Wales,

5.62

Emergency calls

who had to wait more

Number of people

in critical condition

than 60 minutes for

North West 1,303

South Central 171

East Midlands 122

West Midlands 28

59

Source: Health and Social Care Information Centre and Freedom

ary, two regions — the East of England

and the East Midlands — missed

national targets requiring them to

respond to three quarters of the most

severe calls within eight minutes. Even

when ambulance trusts have met these

targets, however, many patients in criti-

cal conditions have had to wait longer

In 2012-13, the last year for which

complete figures are available, more

than 2,200 "Red 2" patients in life-

threatening emergencies were left for

at least an hour. At least 80 people with

"Red 1" conditions, who had suffered

heart attacks or stopped breathing,

faced the same wait. Sometimes delays

than 60 minutes for help.

of Information requests. No figures available for North East

an ambulance

London

Yorkshire

South West

South East

East

occurred when a patient's health deteriorated, but the services' reports suggest many were because of inadequate resources, administrative mistakes or call handlers making the wrong diagnosis over the telephone.

Katherine Murphy, chief executive of the Patients Association, said that the charity was shocked by the numbers. "Patients requiring ambulances in the red category calls are in critical need of urgent, high-quality specialist care. In such cases, time is of the essence."

She added: "Patients in life-threatening situations not getting timely treatment or dying — due to inappropriate handovers to A&E, loss of data, inaccurate triage and lack of resources — is completely unacceptable."

In the North West, where six avoidable deaths were investigated, ambulances responding to a 92-year-old who had suffered a cardiac arrest took more than an hour to arrive after one got "stuck on grass", according to minutes from a board meeting. It is not known whether she survived.

Police officers are understood to have frequently resorted to taking patients to A&E in their patrol cars in at least two regions hit by delays.

The North East Ambulance Service has yet to release full data, but previous figures show 116 patients waiting for longer than two hours to be handed over to A&E departments once they had arrived at the hospital.

In the West Midlands, which reviewed 26 "serious untoward incidents", a spokesman pointed to the service's budgetary constraints. "What other business has seen demand rise by 4 or 5 per cent every year?" he said. "It's fair to say finances are tough. We want to have more ambulances, and in particular we want to have more paramedics." The service is seeking to recruit hundreds more paramedics, but they can take two and a half years to train.

Across England there were 9.1 million emergency calls to ambulance services in 2012-13, compared with 4.93 million in 2002-03, according to the Health & Social Care Information Centre. In some areas the number of calls has more than doubled in a decade. .

The Foundation Trust Network, one of the bodies representing ambulance services, said they had "made considerable efficiency improvements to cope with nearly two million extra calls in the last few years. But if every patient is to receive the most timely and appropriate response, we need to ensure that the ambulance service is provided with the workforce strength and fleet it needs." Leading article, page 28



Elouise Keeling, 14, was left gasping as her life drained away after the ambulance sent to help her went to the wrong airfield

Asthma girl died after ambulance arrived late and poorly equipped

Stressed paramedics and an overstretched service receive little political attention, Oliver Moody writes

"I'm going to die," Elouise Keeling screamed. The 14-year-old girl was in the grip of a severe asthma attack after a sports day on the Royal Air Force base at Brampton, in Cambridgeshire. An hour later, she was dead.

Elouise rang her mother at 7.30pm on June 25 last year to say that she could not walk or breathe. At 7.44pm an ambulance was called. Paramedics arrived at an RAF base within ten minutes, only to discover that the call handler had sent them to another air field with the same postcode seven miles away. By the time they arrived at RAF Brampton at 8.03pm Elouise's mother was panicking.

"I talked to Ellie and I told her to keep breathing," Karen Keeling told her daughter's inquest last week. "She was gasping and it was a long time before the ambulance arrived to be by her side. They seemed very slow getting out of the vehicle. They just strolled over to us.

"The equipment kept failing. The oxygen cylinders kept running out. It seemed like chaos.

"My parents arrived by then and my dad held Ellie's hand."

The coroner, David Morris, ruled last Wednesday that Elouise's death might not have been prevented even had the ambulance arrived earlier.

For Carl Cope, 47, it was a different story. He was handed over to the A&E department at Walsall Manor Hospital, in Staffordshire, with chest pains in June 2012. He went for a drink, and collapsed outside before dying of a heart attack. Investigations by the police and the West Midlands Ambulance Service found that paramedics had gone off to tell security rather than help him. Four ambulance staff and one hospital worker were arrested on suspicion of manslaughter by gross negligence and misconduct in a public office. None was



Ann Semak waited 75 minutes for an ambulance

prosecuted, but one paramedic was sacked and another resigned.

Ann Semark, 78, who fell in Mapperley, Nottingham, last September waited 75 minutes for an ambulance.

More than 300 "serious untoward incidents" were investigated around the country last year, with at least 59 linked to avoidable deaths. While isolated reports of problems abound, the pressures on ambulance staff have received little political attention. Norman Lamb, the Health Minister, came closest last year with a warning that targets for response times were "distorting" the way paramedics served rural areas after Peter Nelson, 26, a trainee chef, died after a two-hour wait for an ambulance in Blakeney, Norfolk.

Some regional ambulance services have already been publicly held to account over their failings, but the explosion in demand and the difficulty in training sufficient numbers of paramedics are consistent across the English trusts surveyed by The Times. The Welsh Ambulance Service has yet to release any information.

Anthony Marsh, who took over at the East of England Ambulance Service in December after working on a scathing report into its management, has replaced 120 vehicles in the trust's ageing fleet. "Our staff are working as hard as possible to get to patients quickly, but there are simply not enough of them, which is why we are recruiting hundreds of student paramedics."

Trade unions argue that stagnating budgets and high demand have left many ambulance staff permanently overworked. Unison, which plans to ballot members in Yorkshire on strike action, is compiling a survey of stress levels among paramedics, and said that the early findings were "very worrying".

Christina McAnea, the union's head of health, said: "The reduction in spending budgets across all ambulance trusts was bound to have a negative impact on the service delivery. At a time when demand is high and A&Es are overwhelmed, it is no wonder that ambulance staff are struggling with targets."

New blood test could pick up the early warning signs of dementia

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healthy participants aged 70 and older who gave blood samples on enrolling and at various points in the study.

During the course of the five-year study, 74 participants developed either mild Alzheimer's or a condition known as amnestic MCI, in which the memory

suddenly deteriorates. In the study's third year, the scientists selected 53 participants who developed dementia and 53 healthy controls. A comparison of their blood revealed ten lipids that appeared strongly linked to the emergence of Alzheimer's. These markers were then used to try to

identify the remaining 21 participants with dementia and 20 controls.

"The lipid panel was able to distinguish with 90 per cent accuracy these two distinct groups: cognitively normal participants who would progress to MCI or [Alzheimer's] within two to three years, and those who would

remain normal in the near future," Professor Federoff said. The team is now designing a clinical trial aimed at identifying people at high risk of Alzheimer's to test a drug that might delay or prevent the emergence of the disease.

"These are encouraging findings, but it's vital to continue investing in research to capitalise on results like these," Dr Ridley said.

"Half a million people are living with Alzheimer's in the UK today, but we still need better ways to diagnose the disease and treatments that can stop it in its tracks. Research is key if we are to make a real difference to people's lives."

Moody, Oliver. "999 'failures' linked to rise in avoidable patient deaths." Times, 10 Mar. 2014, p. 6. The Times Digital Archive, https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/NHQQYW980157275/TTDA?u=west85252&sid=TTDA&xid=d52a4846. Accessed 5 Aug. 2020.