Flu outbreak reveals crisis in Britain's hospitals

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The death toll among Britain's elderly has soared by up to 40 percent this winter. In Croydon, South London there were 106 deaths between Christmas Eve and January 6—a 25 percent rise on the previous year. Coroners' offices, which have reported increased workloads, said most deaths are among the old and are attributable to viral infections, heart problems and the health complications of old age. Many victims were said to live alone.

The current outbreak of flu has been blamed for the sharp rise in deaths and is said to be placing great strains on the National Health Service (NHS). Professor Liam Donaldson, the government's chief medical officer, has described the flu outbreak as "a serious epidemic", stating that the official health figures were too low, and in fact as many as 300 cases per 100,000 could be found.

The particularly nasty strain of influenza affecting Britain has exposed an ongoing crisis in health care provision. Figures published by the Royal College of General Practitioners (RCGP) on Thursday show around 200 people per 100,000 in England visited their GP with flu in the week ending January 9. This is only slightly above the norm for this time of year and the RCGP insist that "the UK still falls well short of what is officially regarded as an epidemic". The RCGP could be underestimating the problem, as Donaldson claims, possibly due to government pressure not to visit the doctor when suffering with flu.

But the total of cases in all probability would still fall short of the official threshold for an epidemic in England, Wales and Northern Ireland of 400 cases per 100,000. The last declared epidemic was in 1989-90, with a peak of 534 cases per 100,000 and 29,000 flu-related deaths reported. The fact is that the NHS has proved incapable of dealing with what is an entirely predictable seasonal outbreak of a winter illness.

The NHS cannot cope because it has lost so many intensive care beds as a result of years of cuts, particularly under the Conservatives. Over the Christmas period there were sometimes less than 20 such beds available nationally. Hospitals in some parts of the country are being forced to leave patients waiting for up to 50 hours on trolleys in casualty units.

A 74-year-old man in Wales died as a result of being ferried between three hospitals in search of an intensive care bed, while a 33-year-old professional rugby player died after being sent home from hospital following a check-up for flu.

Possibly the most appalling case was that of 74-year-old cancer patient, Mavis Skeet, who was admitted to hospital for the removal of a small tumour in her oesophagus (throat). She was due to undergo surgery five weeks ago but her first date was cancelled when the anaesthetist went down with the flu. Three further scheduled operations were stopped due to a shortage of intensive care beds at her Leeds hospital, resulting from an intake of elderly patients suffering from the flu virus. The cancer has now been declared inoperable and Mrs. Skeet is left waiting to die.

The Labour government is desperate to cover up its own role in the long-term decline of health care. Labour's promise to reverse the decline in public health provision has failed to materialise and Blair now finds himself increasingly at odds with all layers of the medical profession. Prominent Labour supporter Lord Winston, a pioneer in the field of fertility treatment, has recorded his disillusionment with the government's handling of a deteriorating NHS. In interview for this week's *New Statesman* magazine, Lord Winston says he believes the public have been deceived and medical care is "deeply unsatisfactory" for many people. The

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Labour peer believes that government health reforms have eroded specialist care, failed to eradicate the internal market set up by the Conservatives and offered a cash provision that is "not as good as Poland's".

"We still have an internal market, but instead of commissioning by local health authorities, we have primary care groups. I think we've [Labour] been quite deceitful about it. We haven't told the truth, and I'm afraid there will come a time when it will be impossible to disguise the inequality of the health service from the general population."

Lord Winston recounted the experience of his 87-year-old mother, who was left waiting 13 hours in casualty before getting a bed in a mixed-sex ward—something he says Labour promised to abolish. She missed meals, drugs were not given on time and she was found lying on the floor when the morning staff came on shift. "She caught an infection and has a leg ulcer," Winston writes.

The response of cancer victim Mrs. Skeet's daughter, Jane, was more forthright: "My mum is devastated and very angry. I know that if she had had the operation five weeks ago the cancer would not have spread to her windpipe. The doctors have said as much to me.

"I'm so angry. The government say they are dealing with the situation, but they are obviously not. I don't think it's just because of the flu crisis either. I think they are just using it as an excuse because there are simply not enough intensive care beds. The flu crisis has just tipped it over the edge."

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