

British pensioner dies after waiting nine hours on hospital trolley

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A 74-year-old pensioner died at an east London casualty department after waiting nine hours for emergency treatment. Retired Ford autoworker Tom Jones had been rushed to Whipps Cross University Hospital with burns and sickness after he had collapsed on a heater at his sheltered accommodation in Ilford.

Jones was seen by a nurse at the Accident and Emergency ward, which was full to capacity at the time of Mr Jones' arrival, and declared a "yellow priority case", meaning a doctor should have seen him within an hour. However, no doctor came and the nurses who checked on him failed to spot an aortic aneurysm—a blocked artery near the heart—leading to his death when it ruptured. If diagnosed soon enough, his condition could have been treated and his death avoided.

An inquiry is to be held into the events.

This tragic incident epitomises the devastating impact of cuts and restructuring on the National Health Service (NHS), which have taken place under successive Conservative and Labour governments.

Jones' death is one of several similar cases in recent years, where people have died on hospital trolleys waiting for treatment or after being sent from hospital to hospital in search of a bed. According to the charity Age Concern, elderly people are often discharged before they are fully recovered because of the pressure to free up beds for other patients, so-called "bed blocking". In 1996/97 in England, more than 86,000 people aged 75 and over were re-admitted to hospital as an emergency within 28 days of being discharge. On the same day as Mr Jones died, a report revealed that patients in London and the south-east are forced to wait an average of five and a half-hours in casualty departments—the longest delay in the country. The figures from the Association of Community Health Councils of England and Wales followed a National

Audit Office report showing that London hospitals also have some of the poorest records for operations, and 13 percent of vacancies for nurses are unfilled.

Nationally, the shortage of beds has risen sharply. In the 1960s there were more than 3,000 NHS hospitals with a total of 550,000 beds. By 1995, there were only 250,000 beds available, a figure that has dropped to 194,000 today, of which only 108,000 are for acute cases, although patient numbers are increasing. The introduction of Labour's Private Finance Initiatives (PFI) into the health service is likely to reduce bed numbers further, according to reports by the British Medical Foundation. Although the £2 billion PFI programme will lead to 30 new hospitals being built over the next few years, these will often replace existing facilities and leave some areas with half the number of beds available at present.

An assessment comparing the efficiency of different countries' health systems produced by the World Health Organisation ranks the UK 24th in the world, below Oman, Jamaica and San Marino.

The deterioration in the NHS has fostered growing hostility from the public and professionals alike. At its annual conference this week, British Medical Association chairman Dr Ian Bogle warned Prime Minister Blair that the health service was in deep crisis and the medical profession was facing its "nemesis". He stated that more than half of GPs (family doctors) are so angry and disillusioned with Labour's promises that they have signalled their readiness to consider mass resignation from the NHS. He said Labour's policies were pushing doctors to "practice at a pace which isn't safe."



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