

British winter death rate predicted to rise

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A higher death rate amongst older people and an increase in cold related illnesses is expected, after the recent extended period of cold weather in Britain.

An increased death rate associated with the winter months is a widespread international phenomenon, but Britain has one of the worst records in Europe. A World Health Organisation (WHO) report published by its European Regional Office last year stated, “The magnitude of the excess in the United Kingdom, at over 40,000 deaths every winter is the highest in the European Union... A large component of excess winter deaths is preventable. Recent analysis suggests that the seasonal variations are related to indoor rather than outdoor temperatures... that excess winter deaths are related to poor housing conditions—insufficient thermal insulation, ineffective heating systems and fuel poverty.”

In a report in the *Observer* January 11, Dr Alan Maryon-Davis, president of the British Faculty of Public Health, explained that there is a well-known correlation between cold weather and increased mortality rates. In Britain a one degree drop below the winter average will lead to an additional 8,000 extra deaths. This was a higher proportion than in countries such as Russia and Finland with much more severe winters than Britain.

He told the newspaper, “...we are worried at the way in which temperatures have been dropping over the past few weeks. But with the flu that we have had circulating, plus the credit crunch and heating prices so high, it is a pretty lethal combination for frail, elderly people. This year is a real triple whammy.”

The figures published by the National Statistics Office, for the excess winter deaths for December 2007

to March 2008, represented a 7 percent increase over the previous winter figures. These excess deaths were predominantly of older people.

Charities working with the elderly expressed their concerns about the toll of the cold weather. The Director General of Age Concern, Gordon Lishman, said, “We are urging vulnerable older people, who are more susceptible to the cold, to take extra precautions to stay warm and keep active. Many of the poorest pensioners are struggling to afford paying for essentials like food and heating... up to £5 billion in benefits is still going unclaimed.”

He called on the government to carry out an awareness campaign and for the government’s fuel poverty strategy to be urgently revised.

Help the Aged linked fuel poverty to the high level of winter deaths. Their press statement explains that over one million households containing an old person were classed as being in fuel poverty. Fuel poverty is defined as spending more than 10 percent of income on fuel to heat the home. “Many are forced to make the critical decision between heating and eating during the winter months. For 25,000 older people each year this decision is fatal.”

Help the Aged spelt out the reasons for fuel poverty—low incomes, houses that are energy inefficient and the high level of fuel prices.

Repeated calls for support for the elderly have been made during the eleven years of Labour government. A Joseph Rowntree report of November 2001, noted that “people in poorly heated homes are indeed more vulnerable to winter death than those living in a well-heated home. This suggests that substantial public

health benefits can be expected from measures that improve the thermal efficiency of dwellings and the affordability of heating them.”

In a paper for presentation at the, Unhealthy Housing: Promoting Good Health Conference at Warwick University in March 2003, John Shelton from Salford University highlighted the role of poor housing in fuel poverty. He wrote: “Fuel poverty was first identified and highlighted as a significant problem in the early 1990s... with some 7 million households... unable to heat their homes... A major contributor to fuel poverty in Britain is the poor energy efficiency of the housing stock... any real improvement would require significant financial investment. Estimates suggest that between £15-20 billion would be needed. At the current rate of expenditure on energy efficiency measures, the earliest the problem would be eliminated would be some time in the next century.”

On the excess death rate in Britain he stated that it “is one of the worst in Europe; only Ireland is comparable... Norway and Sweden have much smaller death rates... despite having much colder winter temperatures... In 1998 Donaldson et al concluded that Britain had worse excess deaths than Siberia!! Many of these cold related deaths are entirely avoidable.”

If anything, the conditions in Britain have gotten worse since these reports were published, especially given the unusually cold snap of the last week or so.

The Autumn edition of *Poverty* magazine published by the Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) in an article, “Who is Fuel Poor?” commented on heating costs: “By June 2008 the domestic fuel commodity price index increased by 51 percent from 2005, more than 5 times the rate of general inflation. The energy companies have warned that prices will rise again—by between a quarter and a third this winter.”

They add, “Fuel poverty is set to become the experience of a majority of households in income poverty... benefit increases do not reflect the real increase in the costs of living of people living on benefits—they spend a larger proportion of their budgets on just the items that are increasing in price

fastest—fuel, food and water.”



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