

Huge increase in hospital admissions for malnutrition in Britain

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A recent Department of Health (DoH) report found a 44 percent rise in UK hospital admissions related to malnutrition over the past five years.

The DoH revealed the number of bed days accounted for by someone with a primary or secondary diagnosis of malnutrition rose from 128,361 in 2010/11—the year the Conservative-Liberal Democrats coalition came to power—to 184,528 last year.

Malnutrition as the main cause of hospital admissions has more than doubled over the past decade. From 65,048 bed days in 2006-2007, the total surged to 184,528 hospital bed days last year.

Each bed costs the National Health Service (NHS) on average £400 a day to staff and a spell in hospital because of malnutrition averages between 22 and 23 days. Information supplied by the House of Commons library shows that 57 percent of the patients involved were women and 42 percent were aged over 65.

The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) classes someone as malnourished if they have a body mass index of less than 18.5, or have suffered the unintentional loss of more than 10 percent of their weight over the last three to six months, or have both a body mass index under 20 and have unintentionally seen their weight drop by more than 5 percent over the previous three to six months.

According to NHS statistics, 3 million people are at risk of malnutrition, with 7,366 of these admitted to hospital with the condition between August 2014 and July 2015, a 51 percent increase since the corresponding period from 2010 to 2011.

Speaking about the increasing numbers of elderly people being admitted to hospital with malnutrition, Simon Bottery, director of policy at the Independent Age charity, said, “These new figures on malnutrition are genuinely shocking. As a society there is no excuse

for us failing to ensure that older people are able to eat enough food, of the right quality, to stay healthy.”

He continued, “Yet we have been cutting back the meals on wheels services and lunch clubs on which so many vulnerable elderly people relied and reducing the numbers who receive home care visits.”

Research by the National Association of Care Catering found that only 48 percent of local councils still provided meals on wheels, compared to 66 percent in 2014. Freedom of information requests submitted to local councils in England found that 220,000 fewer people were receiving meals on wheels in late 2014 than in 2010, a fall of 63 percent. Only 17 percent of councils in the northwest of England still do so, and 91 percent of providers expect the provision to fall further in the next year.

The response of the Department of Health to the findings was not to address the causes of malnutrition, but to glibly suggest that better data collection, more training and a paltry £500,000 to Age UK would assist in the spotting and reduction of malnutrition in the elderly.

Malnutrition is not only confined to the elderly. The figures for the rise in cases of malnutrition and other health issues show the impact of increasing poverty is widespread among all age groups. It is linked to cuts and sanctions to welfare benefits, cuts to and privatisation of health and social care services, unemployment and low pay. This is seen in the massive rise in people who now regularly depend on charities for basic food supplies.

Recent figures by the Trussell Trust, an anti-poverty charity, report a huge uptake in emergency food supplies between April 2016 and September 2016. Across the UK, they distributed 519,342 three-day emergency food supplies to people in crisis, compared

to 506,369 during the same period last year. Of these, 188,584 went to children. The staggering number means that the food bank network is on course to distribute the highest number of food parcels in its 12-year history during 2016-17.

The Trust cited changes to the benefits system and low pay and unemployment as the main causes of the rising use of food banks. It said, “Benefit delays and changes have been the biggest reasons for food bank use, accounting for 44 percent of referrals to Trussell Trust food banks (27.4 percent benefit delay; 16.6 percent benefit changes). Low income was the second largest cause of a crisis, accounting for nearly one in four of all referrals to Trussell Trust food banks, driven by problems such as low pay, insecure work or rising costs.”

A long-term study into increasing levels of deprivation and social and economic inequality since 1983, “Breadline Britain: The Rise of Mass Poverty,” by Joanna Mack and Stewart Lansley, revealed poverty levels have soared, with the current figure standing at 20 million people (around a third of the population). Lansley, the co-author of the 2015 report, stated, “This study paints the most appalling picture of levels of deprivation across the country and of how generations are being denied opportunities.” He added, “It is horrifying and appalling to me that we have a society that has built into its DNA growing levels of poverty. It is completely unjust and completely unnecessary.”

Lansley warned, “You have a situation where levels of poverty will already be rising significantly and the picture can only get bleaker as people become more desperate. On current trends, the next five years will see more people in the UK in poverty, more often and for longer. Despite falling unemployment, the combination of an increasingly polarised labour market, rising housing costs and a continuing squeeze on benefits will put further pressure on low incomes.”

Linking increasing levels of poverty with economic and social inequality, the Oxfam charity revealed that in Britain millions of workers are struggling to cope to put food on the table, let alone maintain a healthy nutritious diet: “The UK is one of the richest countries in the world, but it’s a nation divided into the ‘haves’ and have-nots.’ While executive pay soars, one in five people live below the poverty line and struggle to pay their bills and put food on the table.”

Jonathon Ashworth, Labour shadow health secretary, expressed dismay at the DoH malnutrition figures, stating, “Real poverty is causing vulnerable people, particularly the elderly, to go hungry and undernourished so much so that they end up in hospital.” The research, he said, “reveals a shocking picture of levels of malnutrition in 21st century England and the impact it has on our NHS. This is unacceptable in modern Britain.”

Ashworth did not address the previous Labour government’s systematic assault on the living standards of the working class in the wake of the 2008 economic crash. He also omitted to mention that while in opposition Labour has supported every cut to welfare benefits and public services. Nor did Ashworth mention the role of Labour councils that have carried out every single cut to services and, along with the trade unions, have supported the assault on the living standards of millions of workers and the decimation of the welfare state.



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