

Thousands of UK care home residents dead in COVID-19 pandemic

Robert Stevens
16 April 2020

As in every country, the coronavirus virus has ripped through UK care and nursing homes, which house over 430,000 elderly and vulnerable people. Thousands of lives have been lost without being officially recognised.

Elderly care home residents are portrayed as caught up in an “unfolding disaster” and a “silent crisis.” A more apt characterization is the transformation of care homes into killing fields.

Yesterday, Boris Johnson’s Tory government announced that the coronavirus death toll rose by 761 to 12,868. But again, the government did not include care home fatalities due to COVID-19, or the deaths of people who died in their own homes.

The scale of what is being covered up is beginning to emerge.

According to the government, based on Office for National Statistics (ONS) figures published Tuesday, 217 people had died in care homes in England and Wales as of April 3. But these figures bear no relationship to reality.

Last week, Care England, representing the largest providers of care homes, estimated that the death toll was in the hundreds, but below 1,000. But its latest estimate, published yesterday, is that care home deaths have reached 1,400.

According to the Alzheimer’s Society, at least 2,500 deaths may have occurred in care homes.

According to one estimate by Mike Padgham of the Independent Care Group, which represents care homes and home care providers, the virus may have already taken the lives of at least 4,000 residents.

Reported cases include:

- Burlington Court Care Home in Glasgow, where 16 elderly residents died in just over a week

- Oak Springs in Wavertree, Merseyside, where 15 are suspected to have died from COVID-19. Fifty staff

members developed symptoms or were unable to work due to underlying health conditions

- Finborough Court, a home in Stowmarket, Suffolk, where eight died. Three of the deceased were confirmed COVID-19 victims, while the other five deaths are suspected to be connected to the virus

- Castle View Care Home in Dumbarton, where eight residents have died

- Hawthorn Green home in Stepney, east London, where seven residents have died

- Wren Hall Nursing Home Selston, Nottinghamshire, where 10 residents died of suspected coronavirus over the Easter weekend. Manager Anita Peet said, “We are just having deaths all the time. Are people dispensable? It feels as if people are not worth saving. But that is certainly not how we feel. It’s getting harder and harder every day. We’re fighting a losing battle.”

The government’s refusal to admit the real death toll in homes was demonstrated by Minister for Care Helen Whately, who was asked on the *Good Morning Britain* TV show to respond to the Independent Care Group’s estimate of at least 4,000 deaths. When she smirked, GMB host Piers Morgan asked, “Why are you laughing?”

Even an audit by the pro-Conservative *Daily Mail* has found “at least 951 care home deaths from officially confirmed fatalities by care home operators and local authorities or local media reports.”

This week, three of the largest care home operators in Britain revealed that there had been 620 deaths in their

homes from COVID-19 in recent weeks. The firms—Four Seasons Health Care, MHA and HC-One—run almost 700 homes between them. But there are 5,500 care home providers and the three firms account for only a small fraction of homes (less than 5 percent).

A clearer picture of the real number of deaths outside hospital was provided by the National Records of Scotland on Wednesday. It announced that 962 deaths had been registered in Scotland with COVID-19 mentioned on the death certificate. Of these deaths, 608 were in the past week.

Most died in hospital, but the figures show that 38 percent of fatalities were outside hospital. Some 237 deaths were in care homes (25 percent) and 128 (13 percent) in the home or outside of care.

In the week from April 6 to 12, the virus was mentioned in 31 percent of all deaths registered in Scotland. According to Scottish National Party First Minister Nicola Sturgeon, 433 care homes in Scotland—40 percent of all homes—had recorded coronavirus cases.

Scotland's population is 5.45 million. The UK's is 66.65 million, suggesting that if the Scottish pattern was repeated, deaths outside hospitals would total from 13,000 to over 16,000.

However, a study by the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine points to evidence from five other European countries—France, Belgium, Spain, Italy and Ireland—suggesting that between 42 percent and 57 percent of all COVID-19 deaths happen in care homes.

If one assumes a figure of 50 percent of all coronavirus deaths occurring outside hospital, then the total number of deaths in the UK is around 26,000. The same pattern obtains in other countries, few of which count those who have died outside hospital.

The mass deaths in care and nursing homes are a product of the government's original plan to allow the entire population to become infected by a virus for which there is no vaccine in order to achieve "herd immunity." For the ruling elite, the elderly are viewed as a drain on resources and a burden on the further accumulation of personal wealth and profit—with horrifying consequences.

The pro-Tory *Daily Telegraph* science editor Sarah Knapton wrote what is a staggering indictment of the government on Wednesday, noting that "433,000 older and vulnerable people living in social care have been largely abandoned."

Knapton states, "On March 3—two days before the first death was recorded in Britain, when just 51 people had tested positive for coronavirus—the Care Provider Alliance

issued urgent guidance advising care homes to consider restricting all visits from relatives until the pandemic was over.

"Recognising the danger, the industry body also told homes to restrict the use of new agency staff to reduce the risk of exposure to the virus, and to isolate residents if they were suspected of having it. Yet the Government procrastinated, and it was not until 10 days later [March 13] that official guidance was issued stopping anyone who was 'generally unwell' from visiting residents."

During this period, the government was formulating its herd immunity policy, which was announced on March 12. A lockdown for those over 70 and vulnerable was not imposed by the Tories until March 16, 13 days after the Care Providers Alliance warning.

The lack of adequate personal protective equipment (PPE) for residents and staff is another huge factor in the surge of deaths. To make matters worse, elderly patients were sent from hospital to care homes to free up beds, sometimes bringing the coronavirus with them.

A growing number of elderly people in homes, many of whom were rejected for hospital treatment because they were not considered "high priority," have died alone due to restrictions under the lockdown—particularly in care homes where the virus has taken hold. Relatives have had to say final goodbyes to loved ones through windows or over the phone.

On Wednesday, the government made a show of allowing relatives to see a loved one in person. In response, MHA, a charitable provider of care homes, made clear: "There is nothing stopping relatives saying goodbye in care homes now as long as they have sufficient PPE... So this goes back to the problem of there not being sufficient PPE for the staff, never mind families."



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:
wsws.org/contact