"Staff are working way beyond their capacity, while patients aren't getting the proper care they deserve"

UK health workers denounce government refusal to combat Omicron threat to National Health Service

Richard Tyler
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National Health Service (NHS) workers across the UK have told NHS FightBack of their anger over the Johnson government's refusal to even acknowledge the scale of the crisis produced by the Omicron surge, let alone act against it.

Repeated promises to prevent the NHS from being overwhelmed have been trashed, as each day brings a new record number of infections and hospitalisations.

The UK reported 189,213 new COVID cases December 30, up 116 percent in a week. Deaths rose by 332, up 127 percent on a week ago.

A total of 11,452 people were in hospital in England with COVID-19 as of the morning of December 30, a rise of almost 1,000 in a single day and up 61 percent in a week. Over 500 children were admitted to hospital with Covid in the week leading up to Boxing Day, December 26. This will rise massively as infections over the Christmas holiday period become apparent, soon to be added to by New Year celebrations.

Experts from the University of Warwick have warned that COVID infections in England could reach 1.4 million a day and deaths 3,000 a day if no additional measures are taken, even assuming Omicron is only half as severe as Delta. Daily hospitalisations could reach 15,000.

The only move made in response has been to announce plans to set up coronavirus "surge hubs", mostly in hospital car parks, to meet up to the challenge of a fresh wave of Omicron variant admissions. So far this consists of building eight temporary "Nightingale" units this week, each housing just 100 patients, with plans to identify sites for a further 4,000 beds if necessary. No plans have been announced as to who will staff these extra beds. NHS England has not yet formally requested military support, but no other option is available.

The latest NHS England available data (December 19) recorded 18,829 NHS staff at acute trusts absent due to COVID-19 reasons, up 54 percent from 12,240 a week earlier.

Hospitals have also been asked to review their mortuary facilities.

An NHS worker in the northwest of England explained how stress and fatigue is further exacerbating staff absences. "Everyone is just tired and fed up. The stress of being on a COVID ward, and the potential for it to happen again, perhaps worse with Omicron, is wearing people down.

"A number of us have taken time off throughout this year, for stress. We've nearly all had COVID to varying degrees. I've spoken to consultants, doctors, nurses who all said that at times when being ill with the virus they felt like they were going to die."

Serious problems on wards occurred when patients were transferred before their COVID status had been confirmed.

"We had a recent outbreak, one patient was sent from another hospital before their swab results were back—this is common, to shift patients out for beds. The results came back positive, so we had to treat the whole bay of six patients as positive."

A medical student on placement in an Accident & Emergency department explained how inconsistencies in staffing meant "doctors can't delegate tasks properly and are forced to make decisions on the spot based on situations on that particular day" leading to "a compromise in patient care, as well as stress and burnt out for NHS staff."

Staff shortages meant a strict system of triage was being applied, under which only the most urgent "red" group of patients received immediate attention. "Patients in the

'amber' and 'green' lists have to wait until all other severe patients are seen, which could take anywhere from a couple of hours to a couple of days."

One patient had to wait two days before they were offered a cubicle to start their treatment, "One of the main reasons why this happens is due to lack of staff."

The limited number of doctors and nurses in relation to the growing numbers attending A&E had created a "lose-lose situation, where staff are working way beyond their capacity, while patients aren't getting the proper care they deserve."

A nurse working for the University Hospitals Dorset NHS Foundation Trust said that 159 of his colleagues were currently absent with COVID-19 symptoms, double the number from last week, and another 65 were isolating or shielding. "Last week, the swabbing team themselves were isolating after some of them contracted the virus."

Staff shortages meant hundreds of shifts were being advertised for agency nurses over the next few days. "Many will not get filled even though they include incentives of £50-100 a shift."

This meant not only normal wards but special units, including intensive care and the emergency department, would run with dangerously low staffing levels.

"A colleague in the intensive care unit told me that one nurse had to look after three critically ill patients at times."

Under such circumstances, just one small incident or lack of concentration or a mistake could easily jeopardise patient safety. He described the Emergency Department as "heaving with enormous pressure almost every day," with dozens of ambulances waiting outside the unit to handover patients being a common sight.

"Some days, paramedics have to spend their whole shift (more than 11 hours) waiting outside."

Bed occupancy rates were dangerously high, "More often than not, bed occupancy is exceeding 95 percent. This creates enormous problems for patients as well as the staff. Patients' sleep and resting are constantly disturbed, even during nights because they have to be moved to accommodate others waiting to have beds."

"We have been under relentless and constant pressure over the last 20 months, and it does not seem to be easing."

According to the nurse, "The hospital is going to be inundated with COVID-19 patients immediately after the festive period and we will have to deal with the full burden of this disaster, with fewer members of already burnt out staff."

Patient care has already suffered over the last period. "More than 52,000 patients are waiting to have their elective procedures done in our Trust. More than 3,000 of them have waited more than a year.

"We understand very well patient needs but we cannot fulfil them because we haven't got enough staff. This is a mentally draining and morale busting situation."

The government's decision to let the coronavirus rip through the population during Christmas and New Year will lead to even more cases in early 2022, and inevitably to more deaths.

A young nurse working in London told *Nursing Times*, "Multiple members of my team have had to take time off due to contact with Covid cases or testing positive themselves which then leads to an increase in pressure on those more senior having to orchestrate a drop in staffing levels and also those still able to work and having to pick up the pace with less staff to help."

The nurse said the situation "felt like a regression back to March 2020, except for the fact that in March 2020 I felt a lot more hopeful than I do now."

A former nurse, wrote on Twitter, "The main reason I'm angry with our government: I used to be an #ICUnurse, I'm now a nurse who reluctantly left the job she once loved. I'm the nurse who ended up with anxiety and depression. I'm the nurse who has sleep paralysis and frequent nightmares. My life has changed forever."

An article in *Nursing Notes* published yesterday, headlined, "As winter hits over half of nurses look to leave," garnered nearly two hundred comments on Facebook within hours.

Paul wrote, "lost 5 nurses in my ICU in last 3 months with more set to leave not just department but nursing completely."

Many said they could not wait to retire and would never think of coming back. A recently qualified nurse said she was considering looking for other work, and a nurse on maternity leave said, "I am dreading going back. If I'm honest, it's making me very anxious."

Georgie said she had to take six months out due to depression and stress, "I'm due back in a week and terrified!"

The WSWS urges all NHS and social care workers to contact us with their experiences. For more information, visit NHS FightBack and share your experiences of the pandemic and conditions at work.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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