

UK: Almost 240,000 people died in past two years waiting for National Health Service care

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Almost a quarter of a million people died in the past two years while waiting for hospital treatment in the National Health Service (NHS).

Freedom of Information (FoI) requests made by the Labour Party found that among 35 acute NHS trusts, 30,611 people had died during 2022 while on the NHS waiting list. The 35 trusts represent 25 percent of the total nationally. Among the three quarters of trusts that did not respond were some of the largest in the country.

Labour said that, extrapolating the figures to include all 138 trusts, an estimated 120,695 people died in 2022 while waiting for care. The previous year was almost as bad with 117,000 patients dying.

As a result of well over a decade of austerity, begun during the last Labour government following the 2008 global financial crash, the NHS has been eviscerated to a point where it cannot provide timely treatment to millions of people. As the trusts were not asked to provide a cause of deaths in the FOI requests, it is unknown how many lives could have been saved had care been provided sooner.

There are now a record 7.6 million people on the waiting list in England alone—in a population of 56 million. The NHS is run by devolved administrations in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, with their waiting lists also at record levels.

The homicidal policies put in place by the Conservative government under Prime Minister Boris Johnson during the pandemic resulted in over 230,000 deaths and contributed massively to the surge in waiting list deaths. The roughly 120,000 waiting list deaths in 2021 and in 2022 is double the 60,000 patients who died in the same situation in 2017/18.

Under the NHS constitution, patients should not wait more than 18 weeks for treatment, but this commitment has long been consigned to the scrapheap. Currently

two in five patients wait longer than that to receive healthcare.

A July article in the *Sunday Post* noted that a person waiting for care in at the Ayrshire and Arran trust in Scotland “had to wait nearly seven years for their medical needs to be properly addressed.” Freedom of Information requests “revealed 80 patients have currently been waiting more than three years in that health board alone.”

NHS monthly statistics showed that 383,083 people nationally had waited more than a year to start routine hospital treatment by June, compared with around 3,500 in June 2018.

The *Guardian* reported the Healthwatch England patient advocacy group saying the number of deaths of people on waiting lists was “a national tragedy”. Chief executive Louise Ansari commented, “We know that delays to care have significant impacts on people’s lives, putting many in danger.” The *Guardian* noted that the Royal Free hospital in London alone reported 3,615 waiting list deaths, the Morecambe Bay trust in Cumbria 2,888 and Leeds Teaching Hospitals trust 2,039.

Since the turn of the year, NHS workers, including nurses, ambulance crews, junior doctors and senior consultants have held days of industrial action in pursuit of better pay and more resources for public health care. The nurses and ambulance workers, among 1.1 million staff on Agenda for Change contracts, were sold out by the health trade unions and had a below-inflation pay deal imposed. The only remaining NHS staff in dispute are junior doctors and senior consultants.

An NHS waiting list has been standard for decades, and deaths while waiting for care have been counted in the thousands. But it is only in the last decade, with the

NHS denied hundreds of billions of pounds in the “age of austerity”, that the waiting list has reached such vast levels. According to a December 2019 House of Commons Library analysis, in 2010 “2.5 million people were waiting for hospital treatment... This rose to 4.6 million in September 2019, the highest number to date.”

A further 3.2 million people have been added to the list since then, with horrific implications. In 2012/13, there were an estimated 38,000 waiting list deaths—just 31 percent of the deaths in 2022.

The human cost of the failure of the capitalist class and its political parties to provide high-level, timely health care to the millions who require it will only worsen. Earlier this year Sunak pledged to cut NHS waiting lists, yet they have risen by 700,000 overall since he took office last summer, and by 360,000 since he made his promise in January. Thousands of NHS workers went down sick with COVID and many died due to the lack of provision of adequate PPE. The NHS has a current staffing shortage of 150,000.

The *i* newspaper reported in July, “Last year, leaked NHS England modelling revealed officials believed an ‘optimistic scenario’ was the waiting list for routine NHS care peaking at 9.2 million in March 2024, just under one in six of the population. This was before strike action by nurses, doctors and other NHS staff was even announced. The figure was repeated by then-health secretary Sajid Javid in Parliament. A ‘worst case’ scenario was a peak of 10.7 million people—one in five people—on the waiting list in England by next March.”

Labour’s attempt to make political capital out of the waiting list death toll is nauseating. Announcing its FoI findings, Shadow Health Secretary Wes Streeting said, “Record numbers of people are spending their final months in pain and agony, waiting for treatment that never arrives... Only Labour can rescue the NHS from this crisis and restore it to good health. We will train the staff needed to treat patients on time again, and reform the service to make it fit for the future.”

What a pack of lies. Streeting is pledged to continue NHS cuts, with party leader Sir Keir Starmer warning that Labour in office will not get the “big government chequebook out again.” Last month, Shadow Chancellor Rachel Reeves ruled out a wealth or any significant new tax, stating, “The tax burden is its

highest in 60, maybe even 70, years... I don’t see a route towards having more money for public services that is through taxing our way there.”

Streeting, in between denouncing strikes by health workers, finds the time to write articles in the pro-Tory *Telegraph* and *Times* describing NHS staff as “obstacles” to “unsentimental reform”.

In July he repeated his mantra that the NHS is “not a shrine”, after telling his admirers in the *Telegraph* in January, “We are not going to have a something-for-nothing culture in the NHS with Labour... I’m not prepared to pour money into a black hole.”

Labour is fully behind the looting operation underway to fund NATO’s war against Russia—as vital financial resources are diverted away from the NHS, education, housing and welfare spending. Streeting’s party has consistently denounced the government for not escalating the war budget, with Shadow Defence Secretary John Healey criticising this July, “It was 2.5 percent of GDP in 2010. We have got nowhere near that in any of the 13 years after 2010.”



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