

CARE HOME DEATHS AIRBRUSHED OUT

Thousands of cases are not recorded in official toll, warn critics

By Susie Coen and Tom Kelly

CARE home victims of the virus are being 'airbrushed' out of official death tolls despite as many as half of fatalities happening there, it was claimed last night.

The number is largely unrecorded because figures released by Public Health England only relate to hospital deaths.

As the elderly residents are generally only tested if they are admitted to A&E, MPs warned that thousands of fatalities could be 'swept under the carpet'.

The figures are later counted by the Office for National Statistics when listed on death certificates but there is a long delay.

The most recent statistics - which only go as far as the week ending March 27 - said there had been just 20 coronavirus-related deaths in care homes.

But Care England estimated there have been nearly 1,000 deaths from the disease in elderly people in sheltered accommodation.

And yesterday a study suggested that about half of Covid-19 victims on the Continent are from care homes.

Figures from varying official sources in Italy, Spain, France, Ireland and Belgium estimated between 42 per cent and 57 per cent of deaths from the virus have been happening in homes, research by academics based at the London

'Desperately worried'

School of Economics found. Covid-19 fatalities are not recorded unless doctors put it on death certificates.

And last night a whistleblower told Channel 4 News that this was not happening with those who die in care home in many cases.

The unnamed worker in death registration in the South of England said if the number were being accurately counted it would be equal to the toll in hospitals in their region.

But he revealed instead they put down old age dementia or Alzheimer's - with no mention of Covid-19 - because it was an 'easy option' for GPs.

The whistleblower claimed he was even told by a family doctor in a phone conversation that they had done this.

Caroline Abrahams, charity director of Age UK, said: 'The current figures are airbrushing older people out like they don't matter.'

Labour MP Peter Kyle described the system as the 'final insult' to care home residents. He said: 'They are already dying alone, separated from the people they love in their final moments. Society would never stand for someone who fell in battle not to be recorded as such, and this generation who has given so much to our country deserve nothing less than the truthful record of how they died.'

Liz Kendall, Labour's social care spokesman, has written to Health Secretary Matt Hancock to raise her concerns.

And she has demanded the Government publish the number of care home fatalities daily alongside deaths in hospitals. She said: 'The delay obscures the

scale of the spread of Covid-19 in care homes and the impact on some of the most vulnerable people in our society.

'It is hugely worrying - how can you tackle a problem when you don't know the scale of it in real time? Families desperately worried about their loved ones need to know. Every death counts. The government has to act as a matter of urgency.'

Sarah Owen MP, a member of

the Commons health committee, added: 'Under-reporting could have a profound effect on how decision-makers are responding to coronavirus.'

'We already know that care homes and social care workers are struggling to receive the adequate support they need in terms of job security, as well as protective equipment at work.'

A Department of Health and Social Care spokesman said: 'We

will always be transparent with the public.

'The vast majority of serious cases and fatalities of the virus will occur in hospital settings and for this reason this is also where we concentrate most of our testing. This is the best way to get consistent, up to date and reliable daily figures.'

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Outbreak? The Stanley Park Care Home in County Durham where staff have been left 'distressed' by the crisis

A fifth of our residents have died

NEARLY a fifth of residents at one care home have died after they developed coronavirus symptoms.

The outbreak at Stanley Park Care Home in Stanley, County Durham, has claimed the lives of 13 occupants.

The deaths occurred after one resident died in hospital in March. Another patient is in hospital with the virus.

Care UK, which runs the home, said that, while all the residents who had died showed virus symptoms, only one had officially tested positive for Covid-19.

The 71-bed residential home provides around-the-clock care for those aged

CASE STUDY ONE

over 65 and dementia sufferers. A relative of one patient said the deaths were 'terribly distressing' for staff.

He said: 'I know they are all devastated at the loss of 13 residents, which isn't far from 20 per cent of the total.'

'You can imagine because of some of the residents having one-to-one care, it's like losing a member of your family.'

Care UK's regional director Karen Morrison said: 'My heart goes out to the families and friends of residents who have

passed away over the past few days. We are all thinking of them at this difficult time and send our condolences and best wishes. The manager and her team continue to be absolutely amazing and I cannot thank them enough.

'I'd like to reassure everyone, including relatives of those in the home, that we are doing everything in our power to keep people safe and comfortable.'

'We have all the necessary PPE [personal protective equipment] and we continue to use it meticulously as we have since the first case was seen at the end of last month.'

It's the most soul-destroying thing I have ever experienced

CASE STUDY TWO

THE owner of a nursing home where nine residents have died from coronavirus has described watching the crisis unfold as the 'most soul-destroying' experience of her life.

The first virus death at Wren Hall Nursing Home in Nottinghamshire, which specialises in dementia care, was two weeks ago.

Since then eight more have died, including a 91-year-old man yesterday, and 16 more are infected.

Asked how she is, the home's owner Anita Astle said: 'Broken, I think.'

She added: 'Usually this job is the best job in the world. It's so rewarding.'

'We're having to monitor people very closely. We are observing people deteriorate very rapidly and the awful thing is there's very little we're able to do to stop that.'

Miss Astle told Channel 4 News she did not think the residents who died would have survived if they had gone into hospital and 'they'd probably have been sent back'.

She said: 'It's the most soul-destroying thing I've ever experienced.' Care assistant



Anita Astle: 'Very little we're able to do'

Rebecca Mitchell was asked if she had second thoughts about going in to work at the home. She replied: 'No, not at all.'

'I've got a job to do. I'll come and do it for as long as I'm well enough to. If I get Covid-19, then so be it. If I don't, then I'm lucky.'

Emma Copley, a training nurse associate at the home, rated outstanding by the Care Quality Commission, said: 'You think, hang on, that person's end of life and we're all in there with masks, they can't see our face... it's not the way Wren Hall dealt with end of life, but it's the way we have to do it.'

Ban means I may never see mother again

CASE STUDY THREE

JULIE Ding fears she will not be able to be at her dying mother's bedside after she was banned from visiting her nursing home.

The former social worker has not seen 83-year-old Roberta, who has motor-neurone disease, in six weeks since she was first taken to hospital then the care home.

To keep vulnerable people safe, some facilities have a blanket ban on visitors to prevent the spread of Covid-19.

Miss Ding, 56, was her mother's full-time carer until her condition rapidly deteriorated, leaving her unable to walk or speak and able to breathe only with the help of a ventilator.

She has not seen her since she was taken to a nursing home from hospital on March 2, and has only chatted to her on video calls.

Miss Ding, from West Yorkshire, is desperate for her mother to return home as she fears her condition will worsen inside the home and she is scared she will die alone. She has no family other than her mother after her only sibling, Susan, died aged 49 in 2010.

'I made a promise to my mum I will always be by her side,' she said. 'I'm allowed in when she's in the last throes of death, the manager will decide.'



Close: Julie Ding, right, as a child with mother Roberta and late sister Susan

The elderly abandoned like lambs to the slaughter

AFTER Boris Johnson fell ill it became fashionable to herald the incident as proof that coronavirus does not discriminate.

But we know perfectly well that it does discriminate, by hitting older people with far more lethal force.

Yet Government policies, combined with our apparent indifference to the plight of our parents' and grandparents' generation, have created a deadly wave which is crashing over our care homes.

Care England, which represents care providers, estimates almost 1,000 older people have died in care homes since the epidemic started. I use the term 'estimate' intentionally, because that's all it can do.

For, in an omission that speaks eloquently of a shaming state of mind which devalues the lives of the oldest generations, the Government does not include these deaths in the daily figures it releases.

But even if the deaths of the very old were given the same standing and dignity as the middle-aged and the young, it would be impossible for Health Secretary Matt Hancock to determine how many elderly people are succumbing to the virus because coronavirus testing is not being routinely carried out in care homes.

The little we do know, however, is terrifying. In recent weeks this pandemic has mercilessly charged through 2,200 care homes. In just one 24-hour period, there have been 100 new outbreaks in care homes across the country.

All of which makes it baffling - disgraceful, even - that pleas from managers of care homes for personal protection equipment (PPE) are going unanswered.

It's hardly surprising that many petrified staff are considering refusing to return to their jobs until they're given adequate safety equipment. They are concerned not just about themselves but also about spreading the disease to others.

There is much heroism among the staff, particularly those who have moved into care homes to reduce the risk of infection.

But otherwise there are few redemptive news stories to be found here. Just hidden silent death, with our elderly citizens who raised us and demanded so little in return now slipping away alone and isolated.

The shameful truth is that many just care home residents who fall ill are being refused hospital admission. One woman of 90 who lives near me had a carer twice a day. But that carer became unwell and was not replaced. As a result, the vulnerable



COMMENTARY by Ros Altmann FORMER PENSIONS MINISTER

woman was left to fend for herself and nearly died of dehydration after an ambulance service refused to take her to hospital for treatment.

In all my decades of campaigning for the dignity of the elderly, there has been no clearer snapshot of how they are being abandoned like lambs to the slaughter. They are being left to die because we don't value their lives as highly as the young.

Of course, the Government keeps out of the debate by refusing to confirm that any such policy exists. And certainly some would say that we should discriminate in favour of the young over the very old.

But that does not mean that the NHS should be favoured over the care sector even before our hospitals have reached full capacity. These elderly are not being offered the best chance to recover today in case our health system needs to treat younger people tomorrow.

THERE are no winners here, but when hospitals do not take in the elderly they face a horrible death, at home or in care homes, without ventilators or oxygen nor even the palliative care that any civilized society should be able to provide.

Once again, the elderly are being hung out to dry by this country's failure to eliminate the artificial distinction between 'health' and 'care'.

A millionaire with cancer would normally be treated by the NHS with state of the art equipment and expensive drugs. But an old person with coronavirus or other illnesses may be abandoned in their care home, all the while using their life savings or family home to cover enormous fees.

We rightly laud the brave NHS workers at the front line of this wretched epidemic. We celebrate our healthcare system not just for what it does, but for what it says about us as a civilized society.

But when our compassion fails those who need it most and to whom we owe everything, can we really be so sure of our moral superiority?