

THE CARE HOME CATASTROPHE

They're the army of potential victims no one talks about: our 500,000 care home residents – and their helpers who get no routine tests... yet are moved from one home to another

THE nation's half-million care home residents face becoming the 'abandoned victims' of the coronavirus crisis, campaigners warned last night. The disease has already torn through dozens of care homes, leaving them looking like 'war zones' and cases are expected to explode in the next few days unless urgent action is taken. Now bosses are pleading for access to coronavirus tests amid fears carers and agency workers who do shifts in several homes a week are spreading it in multiple high-risk locations. They also warned they are being forced to play 'Russian roulette' with residents' lives after the Government asked them provide beds for untested patients discharged from over-run hospitals. MPs described the treatment of care home residents as an 'unseen

By **Tom Kelly** Investigations Editor and **James Tozer**

have become ill or been in hospital. Peter Kyle MP who has written to Boris Johnson to warn of the dangers, said: 'The lack of strategy for care homes is killing people. How can they say that I as an MP has to stay home, but somebody working in four or five care homes in a week is allowed to work and not allowed to be tested? It's unimaginably stupid. If the virus gets into a care home it will kill. The only strategy is to keep it out. The only way is to keep it out is to test the people who go in.' At the Oaklands Nursing Home in his Hove constituency it took ten days to test a 94-year-old man who later died from the virus. During the wait, 14 other residents and seven staff developed symptoms, one of whom is now in intensive care. Most of the staff were agency workers who also worked in other care homes – at least one of which has now confirmed cases of coronavirus.

Government guidance issued this week suggests care homes may have to accept new residents who have coronavirus. It says hospitals will not routinely test patients entering care homes, meaning managers will be unaware if returning residents are infectious but not showing symptoms. It said: 'Some patients may have Covid-19... all of these patients can be safely cared for in a care home if this guidance is followed.' Andy Geach, boss of Sheffield Lodge care home in Hampshire, said he has been asked to provide beds to ease struggling hospitals, but is worried about putting his existing residents at risk. Mr Geach added: 'We do not want to play Russian roulette with people's lives.' Martin Green, chief executive of Care England, which represents

providers of all sizes, warned of a catastrophic impact unless testing is ramped up. He said 'hundreds' of care homes were reporting residents displaying symptoms of coronavirus. Professor Green insisted homes could stop the virus spreading – if they received the help they needed. 'Homes are used to controlling infections like norovirus and flu, but they can't get residents tested to find out if they have Covid-19.' Another care home manager said a GP has warned her that no one over 75 in her home will be treated in hospital if they contract the virus

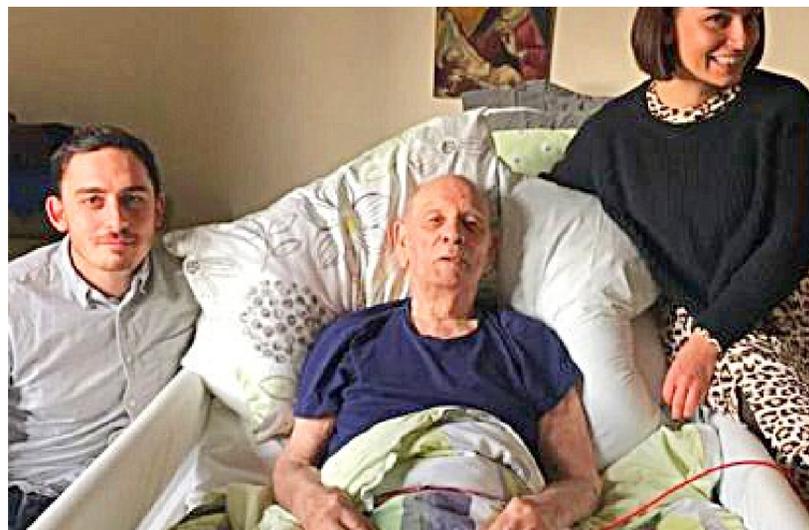
OAK SPRINGS, WAVERTREE, LIVERPOOL

MANAGERS have warned they face being 'overwhelmed' by coronavirus. Six residents have so far died, and 48 of the remaining 66 have begun showing Covid-19 symptoms – with three yesterday placed on end-of-life care plans. A staggering 50 staff have been off with flu-like symptoms. General manager Andrea Lyon issued an urgent plea for help earlier this week from retired medics or even the Armed Forces as a 'last roll of the dice'. 'We're desperate for help,' she said on Tuesday. 'I only have 20 staff left to cover shifts and GPs have refused to visit the home for two weeks now.' The state-of-the-art care home – which opened three years ago – said it had also run out of face masks. Mrs Lyon (pictured on the right with care worker Amanda Pettitt) goes to work every day despite her husband being classed as vulnerable because he has type one diabetes. She said 'the phone hasn't stopped ringing' since her appeal as doctors and nurses offered to help. Extra protective equipment has also been delivered, but a lack of testing makes it impossible to know which residents are infected. 'I just get home and start crying because you can't do it at work in front of the staff,' she told the Daily Mail this week. 'But we have a duty of care and we cannot let our residents down. Some of them are

CASE STUDY 1



war veterans. They did their duty.' At the Old Vicarage care home in Allithwaite, Cumbria, one resident has tested positive for coronavirus, with another six displaying symptoms, prompting pleas for more protective equipment. With no testing available, manager Kamal Siddiqi said staff at the home, near Grange-over-Sands, had no way of knowing if the other residents were infected too. 'Any help or



resources people could offer us would be greatly appreciated,' he told the North West Evening Mail. 'Face masks are particularly hard to find and we're going through them quite quickly. We would also appreciate any vol-

untary help. This doesn't have to be interacting with clients but rather picking up and dropping off supplies or chatting to clients via Skype.' The resident in hospital is said to be 'doing well' with no-one else displaying serious symptoms.

CASE STUDY 2

OAKLANDS, HOVE

FIFTEEN out of 20 residents of Oaklands Nursing Home in East Sussex this week developed coronavirus symptoms, with a member of staff in intensive care. However, just three were tested – among them Giuseppe Casciello, 95, who died on Monday. Relatives have visited Mr Casciello (pictured left) every day for seven years but to compound their grief they could not be at his bedside when he died. Rose Edmunds, whose 94-year-old mother is among those to fall ill, said staff had taken every precaution. 'Despite all their efforts others went down with it,' she said. Managers have appealed for the loan of camper vans so staff can remain on-site instead of returning home and potentially infecting families. The home declined to comment yesterday. But a staff member currently in self-isolation said they had been provided inadequate personal protective equipment. 'It



just spread and spread and spread,' he said. 'When I left, it felt like a war zone.' At Plas Pengwraith care home in the foothills of Snowdonia, two residents have died this week after they are suspected to have contracted coronavirus. Staff have declined to comment at the home, which is run by Gwynedd council. Public Health Wales said it was 'supporting providers of care homes to ensure they are following the appropriate guidance and implementing measures such as infection control precautions'.

This is like working in a war zone

COMMENTARY by Peter Kyle, MP

A CRISIS on a scale that defies imagination is sweeping Britain's care homes. Unseen, unreported and too often alone, our elderly are dying from the coronavirus epidemic – killed by the system that is meant to keep them safe. And as they die, they are denied the basic comfort of seeing their loved ones for the last time. It's the bitter truth that it is our dedicated care workers who are the very people spreading this virus into care homes. I want to say this in the starkest possible terms. The public are rightly insistent that doctors, nurses and hospital staff need urgent protection, but a catastrophe of equal proportions is going unobserved. For while we are focused on a few hundred hospitals, there are tens of thousands of care homes across the British Isles where carers are barely coping – despite their heroic and selfless efforts. They are utterly unprepared for this contagion. They do not have the training to deal with it, and in many cases they are lucky to have even the most basic equipment. One care home manager told me that all the protective gear she had received was a box of 250 flimsy facemasks. But her staff continue to provide close personal care daily. They are at high risk both of contracting the virus and of spreading it. Crucially, many care workers are employed by agencies that send them to several homes in the course of a week. Since the coronavirus crisis began, these institutions have closed their doors to family members. These visits are a highlight of the week for most residents, but it's a necessary precaution. Meanwhile, a far greater risk is created by sending agency workers from one home to the next, unwittingly carrying the virus with them. Once Covid-19 gets into a care home, it is almost inevitable that all the residents and probably all the staff will get it. Indeed, one manager in my constituency of Hove told me that her home to 75 people was provided with just five testing kits. Four came back positive. At another with only 13 residents, seven staff are off sick with viral symptoms. One is in intensive care. I was an aid worker in the Balkans for a decade and I'm having conversations with care staff and managers now that remind me vividly of that war zone. They are in extreme crisis, being stretched in ways they could never have anticipated. Yet the Government seems oblivious to all this. Deaths in care homes from coronavirus are not even included in the official

statistics, which are based on hospital fatalities only. Residents are being asked to sign 'do not resuscitate' (DNR) forms and told attending hospital won't be an option for most of them. Meanwhile, care homes are being told to prepare for inevitable outbreaks of fatal disease, in effect becoming hospices with no announcement and no public debate. In his 90-minute press conference this week, Health Secretary Matt Hancock didn't refer to care homes once. TO SOLVE this crisis, four things need urgently to be done. First, everyone who works in a care home has to be tested for Covid-19. If they have the infection, they must not go to work. Secondly, the agency system that sends carers into several homes each week must stop. The Government needs to work with employers to ensure staff are assigned to just one home each, which will mean urgent funding to increase staff capacity. Thirdly, we need much more protective equipment. Staff don't have even the basics to deal with Covid-19. This is an outright failure by the Government. At the last Prime Minister's Questions before sittings of the Commons were suspended, the PM told me all the protective gear Britain needed would be delivered within a week. Nothing remotely like this has happened. Lastly, we need antibody tests for relatives whose loved ones are dying. People who have already had the virus need to be able to show they are no longer at risk of catching or transmitting the disease. Without these tests, they are not allowed to be with beloved parents and grandparents in their last hours. This week I was shocked to speechlessness when a lady named Gisela told me that her father Giuseppe had died in isolation, in a care home in my constituency. For seven years, members of Giuseppe's family had visited him every single day. That ended several weeks ago. Giuseppe, who had his 95th birthday two days before he died, was completely alone at the end. Gisela's heart is breaking at the thought of it. That story is happening up and down the country. It's barbaric and we have to act now. ■Peter Kyle is the Labour MP for Hove

Where are our masks?

CHRONIC shortages of masks, gloves and goggles are causing major problems for care homes battling the crisis. Vital supplies of personal protection equipment (PPE) promised by the Government have yet to arrive, care home bosses have warned. And those trying to buy their own are being charged skyrocketing prices by 'unethical' suppliers cashing in on the crisis, it was claimed. Nadra Ahmed, of the National Care Association, said the supplies were vital if care homes were to avoid the horrific scenes witnessed in Spain and Italy. She said: 'We can turn the tide, but we need equipment so staff can be protected and tests so they can carry on working. Our staff are used to nursing people back from pneumonia and strokes, but they can't do it if social care continues to be seen as an afterthought.'

PICTURE OF SELFLESSNESS

PAGES 42-43