

Policy Position Paper

Dignity in Health and Social Care (England)

March 2016

At all times, older people using health and care services must be treated and cared for with dignity and respect.

Key Issues

In England, approximately 405,000 people aged over 65 are living in almost 18,000 care homes. 65 per cent of all admissions to hospitals are people over 65 and because, on average, they stay longer they make up around 70 per cent of bed days¹. It is estimated that the number of people living with dementia in the UK is projected to rise to 1 million by 2021.² The NHS Constitution states 'You have the right to be treated with dignity and respect, in accordance with your human rights. However, only 11 per cent of the general public feel older people are treated with dignity and respect in hospitals³. When asked about social care, the number is 36 per cent, despite these being services essential to day-to-day living⁴. Current health and social care provision is sadly often of poor quality and fails to deliver person centred care that treats older people with dignity, respect and courtesy.

There have been countless reports and media stories in recent years that have exposed shocking failures in the care of older people. In 2015, the London School of Economics (LSE) found that around a million older people reported 'poor or inconsistent standards of dignity and respect' when in hospital⁵. Around 640,000 older people reported not getting enough help to eat. The same year, Age UK, as part of the Care and Support Alliance, made a submission to the Spending Review calling for investment in social care services in the face of on-going cuts to funding, saying the current situation "is compromising the dignity, health and wellbeing of older and disabled people"⁶

These examples came three years after Age UK joined together with the Local Government Association and the NHS Confederation⁷ to establish the Commission

¹ Cornwell J et al. Continuity of care for older hospital patients: a call for action. King's Fund, 2012

² http://www.alzheimers.org.uk/site/scripts/documents_info.php?documentID=341

³ TNS Agenda for Later Life survey for Age UK, 2015

⁴ TNS Tracker Survey for Age UK, Feb 2015, of adults aged 50+ in Great Britain

⁵ Older people's experiences of dignity and nutrition during hospital stays: Secondary data analysis using the Adult Inpatient Survey, Vizard, P., Burchardt, T., LSE, 2015

⁶ http://www.ombudsman.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0016/7216/Care-and-Compassion-PHSO-0114web.pdf

⁷ <http://www.ageuk.org.uk/Global/Delivering%20Dignity%20Report.pdf?dtrk=true>

on Dignity in Care for Older People⁸. The Commission discovered a number of levers that could improve the quality and experience of care for older people. For example, staff must be recruited and trained to uphold the right values of care and be empowered as well as being treated with respect themselves. Crucially there needs to be a cultural change among the NHS and social care providers in the way care is delivered to older people.

However the key driver for change must be those older people themselves who use health and care services along with their friends and families. Greater influence, as individuals or collectively, in decision making, advocacy to help people to put forward their views, and a clear framework of rights can all help in this respect. While there has been significant progress after the publication of the Commission's final report, the LSE report demonstrates there is still a long way to go, and perhaps even more so in social care in light of the savage cuts local authorities are experiencing.

Following the public inquiry into Mid-Staffordshire NHS Foundation Trust, often referred to as the Francis report, the Government largely accepted the majority of its recommendations. In response, many NHS hospitals have worked at increasing staffing, often having to rely on agency nurses. With flat funding in the NHS as a whole, this has resulted in the hospital sector projected to end 2015/16 with a £2.8 billion deficit. This presents a dual risk of reductions in staffing levels to address these deficits as well as compromises in continuity if reliance on agency staffing continues. With the LSE report linking lower levels of staffing with poor performance in delivering basic care, health and care providers face a huge challenge in maintaining standards on dignity.

Public policy proposals

- Older people must be empowered and enabled to take an active role in their care and have their views and wishes listened to and acted upon so they can retain their sense of dignity.
- Health and care providers must embed dignity and the promotion of human rights into frontline practice, recruitment, professional training and organisational ethos and values.
- Commissioners should consider how to specify dignified care when commissioning services.
- Regulators should ensure that assessment of health and care providers pays as much attention to delivery of high standards of compassionate care, measured by older people's experiences, as it does to clinical quality.
- All professional providers have a duty to provide good quality care. Senior managers and board members have a particular role in ensuring the right culture of care is present in services for older people.

⁸ <http://www.ageuk.org.uk/Global/Delivering%20Dignity%20Report.pdf?dtrk=true>

- Health and care services must comply with the Equality Act 2010 which outlaws unfair discrimination on the basis of age and places a duty on public services to actively promote age equality. Compliance must be closely assessed against patient experience using standards developed with a wide range of people in later life.

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