

Winter crisis shows UK health service at 'tipping point'

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Britain's NHS public health service has been the country's pride since 1948, but is currently gripped by a "humanitarian crisis" due to alleged "third world" conditions that are piling pressure on Prime Minister Theresa May.

The stark image of 22-month-old Jack Harwood, wearing only a nappy, stretched across two plastic chairs while waiting to see a doctor in an Accident and Emergency ward dominated the front page of the Daily Mirror newspaper on Friday, laying bare the depth of the winter crisis.

Despite showing some of the symptoms of meningitis, the toddler was only briefly seen by a nurse before having to wait nearly five hours in A&E to see a doctor.

Doctors and hospitals have said the National Health Service (NHS) is "approaching a tipping point", with every winter putting increasing stress on the free-at-point-of-use service, described as a "national religion" by former minister Nigel Lawson.

The service, the world's fifth largest employer with 1.5 million staff, is also political dynamite with the power to decide elections.

Brexit campaigners made it one of their main campaign themes, promising to channel it funds hitherto earmarked for Brussels.

But a raft of stories of NHS failure have hit the newspapers over recent

years as it struggles to cope with a growing and ageing population and austerity policies.

The slightest surge in demand, such as this year's flu epidemic, can be enough to plunge it into chaos with A&E waiting times surging.

Last week, 23 percent of patients waited more than four hours to see a doctor while two patients died on stretchers in a corridor at the Worcestershire Royal Hospital this week, revealing a shortage of beds, ambulances and doctors.

'The eternal winter'

Richard Kerr, a member of the Royal College of Surgeons, said he had never seen such a serious situation in his 26-year career.

Red Cross chief executive Mike Adamson even called it a "humanitarian crisis", a conclusion rejected by Conservative premier May, who called the comment "irresponsible and overblown".

"We acknowledge that there are pressures on the health service, there are always extra pressures on the NHS in the winter" she said Friday.

But for many, the malaise is much deeper.

"This is not a 'winter' crisis. This is a blizzard in an eternal winter of the NHS," said Mark Holland, a doctor specialising in acute illnesses.

"We are asking the staff to offer a first-class service with numbers and beds worthy of the Third World."

In a moving speech in parliament, MP Toby Perkins said he was "ashamed" that his father had received better care while on holiday in

Germany than at home.

His father died, in the MP's arms, of a ruptured aneurysm in July after being sent home from hospital due to a shortage of beds.

Britain spent 7.7 percent of its GDP on public health in 2015, compared to 8.6 percent in France and 9.4 percent in Germany, according to OECD figures.

"We have been issuing warnings of the system approaching a tipping point for some time," said Stephen Dalton, chief executive of the NHS Confederation, which represents managers across England.

"The government must accept that limited investment at a time of increased demand has consequences."

May argues that no government has ever invested so much, promising an extra £10 billion (\$12 billion, 11.5 billion euros) over six years until 2020.

NHS England manager Simon Stevens disputed May's claims, saying: "In 2018/19, in real terms (after inflation), NHS spending is going to go down—10 years after Lehman Brothers and austerity began."

"The prime minister is in denial," said opposition Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn.

Downing Street on Saturday warned surgeries in England which refuse to move to opening 8:00am to 8:00pm, seven days a week, will lose funding unless they can prove there is no demand from patients.

"A large number of surgeries are not providing access that patients need," and as a result they are forced to go to A&E.

Corbyn put May on the spot during a heated session in parliament on Wednesday, asking her if she found toddler Jack's situation acceptable.

The prime minister said it was one of a few "isolated incidents", but the boy's mother said the leader was out of touch.

"How can Theresa May not realise the extent of the situation with all these horror stories we hear," Rose Newman told the Daily Mirror.

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