

Figures show hundreds of COVID-19 deaths in UK care homes

April 14 2020, by Jill Lawless and Sylvia Hui



A cyclist passes graffiti as the country continues in lockdown to help curb the spread of the coronavirus, in London, Monday, April 13, 2020. The new coronavirus causes mild or moderate symptoms for most people, but for some, especially older adults and people with existing health problems, it can cause more severe illness or death. (AP Photo/Kirsty Wigglesworth)

Leading British charities said the new coronavirus is causing "devastation" in the country's nursing homes, as official statistics showed

Tuesday that hundreds more people with COVID-19 have died than are recorded in the U.K. government's daily tally.

The Office for National Statistics said 5,979 deaths that occurred in England up to April 3 involved COVID-19, 15% more than the 5,186 deaths announced by the National Health Service for the same period.

As of Tuesday the government had reported more than 12,000 deaths in the U.K. of people with the new coronavirus.

That total, updated daily, only includes people who died in hospitals. The higher figure, published weekly by the statistics office, includes deaths in all settings including nursing homes, and cases where coronavirus was suspected but not tested for.

Caroline Abrahams, director of the charity Age U.K., said the government's daily figures "are airbrushing older people out like they don't matter."

Age U.K. and other charities have written to Health Secretary Matt Hancock calling social care "the neglected front line" in the pandemic.

"We are appalled by the devastation which coronavirus is causing in the care system and we have all been inundated with desperate calls from the people we support, so we are demanding a comprehensive care package to support social care through the pandemic," said the charities, which include Care England and the Alzheimer's Society.



Britain's Health Secretary Matt Hancock arrives in Downing Street, London, Tuesday April 14, 2020. Prime Minister Boris Johnson remains in convalescence at his country home of Chequers, following his hospitalisation with the coronavirus. The highly contagious COVID-19 coronavirus has impacted on nations around the globe, many imposing self isolation and exercising social distancing when people move from their homes. (Stefan Rousseau / PA via AP)

The statistics office said that up to April 3 just under 10% of deaths involving COVID-19 occurred outside hospitals. It said there were 217 deaths involving the virus in care homes in the week to April 3, a ten-fold increase from the previous week.

The government says outbreaks of COVID-19 have been reported at one in eight U.K. care homes.

Care home operators and staff say that figure likely underestimates the

true toll in facilities that house some of the country's oldest and most vulnerable people, cared for by often overworked and poorly paid staff.

David Behan, chairman of home operator HC-One, said cases of the new coronavirus had been reported in 232 of the firm's homes—two-thirds of the total. He said 311 residents and one staff member have died with confirmed or suspected COVID-19.

"COVID-19 deaths are representative of about ... just under about a third of all deaths that we've had over the past three weeks," he told the BBC.

Care homes across the country say they have struggled to get adequate protective equipment for staff, and are seeing staff shortages as many workers fall ill or have to self-isolate.



A sign above an underpass in London advises drivers to stay at home, as the country is in lockdown to help curb the spread of the coronavirus, Monday, April 13, 2020. The new coronavirus causes mild or moderate symptoms for most people, but for some, especially older adults and people with existing health problems, it can cause more severe illness or death. (AP Photo/Kirsty Wigglesworth)

Britain's Conservative government is facing criticism for many aspects of its response to the pandemic, including the limited amount of testing being done for the virus and delays in getting protective equipment to medics and care workers.

The government insists it is rectifying those mistakes. It has vowed to conduct 100,000 tests a day by the end of April—a more than five-fold increase on current rates—and has begun testing health care workers so that those who have been self-isolating but are free of the disease can return to work.

Care-home workers are now also being offered tests, but only 505 have been tested so far, compared to 47,000 health care staff, the government said.

"We are constantly trying to get more support to the social care sector, and we do acknowledge that more needs to be done," said Prime Minister Boris Johnson's spokesman, James Slack.

Worldwide, more than 1.9 million infections have been reported and over 119,000 people have died.

Liz Kendall, social care spokeswoman for the main opposition Labour Party, said the real number of U.K. deaths would "sadly be even worse" than the figures up to April 3.



A sign in Hyde Park in London advises social distancing, as the country is in lockdown to help curb the spread of the coronavirus, Monday, April 13, 2020. The new coronavirus causes mild or moderate symptoms for most people, but for some, especially older adults and people with existing health problems, it can cause more severe illness or death. (AP Photo/Kirsty Wigglesworth)

"We urgently need these figures on a daily basis to help deal with the emerging crisis in social care and ensure everything possible is being

done to protect more than 400,000 elderly and disabled people who live in nursing and residential care homes," she said.

Ros Altmann, a former government minister who campaigns for older people, said frail elderly people were being overlooked in the pandemic.

"We must not forget that the mark of a civilized society must reflect how it treats its most vulnerable and oldest citizens," she said.

"We must not forget the most elderly in our population—the average age of people in our care homes is 85—their lives are also valuable and they need the treatment and the equipment and the care that we would expect for anyone else in society as well."

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