

'Unimaginable human tragedy' in Europe's care homes: WHO

April 23 2020

The World Health Organization said Thursday Europe was seeing an "unimaginable human tragedy" at its care homes, where deaths from the new coronavirus accounted for up to 50 percent in some countries.

The WHO regional director for Europe, Hans Kluge, called the situation "deeply concerning."

Speaking at a weekly press conference, Kluge said estimates from some European countries showed that "up to half of those who have died from COVID-19 were residents in long-term care facilities."

As of April 13, 245 of the 444 deaths in Ireland, or 55.2 percent, were linked to long-term care facilities, according to figures sent to AFP by the WHO.

In France, as of April 15, 49.4 percent of deaths were linked to care facilities, while in Belgium 49.1 percent of the 4,857 deaths linked to COVID-19 as of April 16 were in care homes.

Care England, Britain's largest representative body for care homes, said last week that estimates based on some of the death rates since April 1 suggested up to 7,500 people in British care homes may have died of the virus, five times the official estimate.

Meanwhile, the International Long-Term Care Policy Network said on April 17 that data reported by media from official sources showed that

COVID-19 related deaths in care homes in Portugal and Spain were 33 and 53 percent respectively.

Kluge stressed there was "an immediate and urgent need to rethink and adjust how long-term care facilities operate."

This included prioritising screening and organising special units for COVID-19 patients, even before first cases are reported.

"Even among very old people who are frail and live with multiple chronic conditions, many have a good chance of recovery if they are well-cared for," Kluge said.

He said workers in care facilities were "often overstretched, underpaid and unprotected", lacking gear to protect themselves and the people they cared for.

Facilities also needed to establish plans to prevent and control infections.

He says that those in care homes were "particularly vulnerable" to the virus.

"Their advanced age, underlying health conditions, cognitive challenges in understanding and following health and hygiene advice due to intellectual disability or dementia, for example, are all factors that put them at greater risk."

'Terrible ordeal'

Additionally, countries needed to find ways to protect the elderly and vulnerable without leaving them totally cut-off and isolated, WHO emergencies director Michael Ryan told reporters on Wednesday.

"These are trade-offs that are very difficult to manage," he said.

"There are many, many older people living in long-term care facilities who at the best of times are lonely, and the last number of weeks has been a terrible ordeal for them, both to be further isolated but also with the constant threat of potentially becoming sick with this disease."

He said long-term care facilities must react "very quickly" to stamp out the disease at the first sign of infection, stressing the need for adequate staffing and for carers to have adequate training.

Nearly half of all reported cases of the new coronavirus worldwide have been registered in the WHO's European region, which stretches from the Atlantic to the Pacific and includes 53 countries as diverse as Russia and Andorra.

Over 110,000 deaths have also been reported in the region.

The UN agency also noted with concern an increase in cases in the eastern part of its zone, particularly in Russia, Turkey and Ukraine.

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