

Record number of starving pensioners admitted to hospital

By Laura Donnelly

RECORD numbers of pensioners are being admitted to hospital suffering malnutrition amid a growing social care crisis.

Charities said the figures were “shocking,” with vulnerable people being left to starve for want of help at home or in care homes.

The statistics from NHS Digital show a tripling in adult hospital admissions with a primary or secondary diagnosis of malnutrition in the past decade.

In 2017-18 there were 8,537 such cases, compared with 2,893 in 2008-9.

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The number of cases of adult hospital admission with a primary or secondary malnutrition diagnosis in 2017-18

Experts said the majority involved elderly patients, with malnutrition only diagnosed after they were admitted for other reasons, such as a fall.

It comes amid growing concern about a crisis in social care, with rising numbers forced to pay for help.

In his first speech as Prime Minister, Boris Johnson promised to “fix the crisis in social care once and for all”.

A Green Paper on social care, promised two and a half years ago by the Government, has been repeatedly delayed, with manifesto pledges made in 2017 dropped amid fears they could cost the Tories the election, after proposals were dubbed a “dementia tax”.

Lesley Carter, from charity Age UK, said many isolated elderly people were left to waste away, without anyone noticing. She said care visits were so rushed that meals were dumped in front of frail pensioners, with workers leaving without checking they were able to eat them.

“We find elderly people living on cream crackers, often their family have no idea how malnourished they are until they are admitted to hospital because they’ve got so frail,” she added.

She said some care homes failed to ensure residents were properly fed, with around half of those admitted to hospital from the homes underweight.

NHS statistics show that in 2017-18, half of pensioners who went to their local council for help were refused it.

Research by the King's Fund suggests 13,000 fewer adults were granted help between 2015-16 and 2017-18.

Shelley Hopkinson, from the Independent Age charity, said the figures were “shocking,” reflecting a badly neglected social care system. “Too many older people aren’t getting the care they need because they’re put off by a complex and confusing system, while the crippling cost of care risks draining all of their savings,” she said.

Last week, more than 60 health service leaders urged Mr Johnson to urgently tackle the social care crisis.

A Department of Health and Social Care spokesman said: “We have given half a million pounds to Age UK to reduce malnutrition among older people and are backing the NHS Long Term Plan with an extra £33.9 billion a year by 2023-24. This Government is committed to fixing the social care system once and for all and will outline proposals as soon as possible.”