

9.4.2020

Dear Secretary of State,

As doctors, we urge you to address a gaping hole in the government's response to the Covid-19 epidemic. Urgent action now could save untold suffering in the next few weeks, and will also help to relieve pressure on hospital facilities.

We wrote to the Prime Minister nine days ago [30th March], to highlight a lack of leadership in the **provision of palliative care at home for those who choose to remain there, even with life-threatening Covid-19**. Some may be obliged to do this if hospital services reach full capacity, but many will choose this option, after consultation with their doctor, because they would prefer to stay in familiar surroundings, despite the possible extra risk to their life.

We know that the Prime Minister has been incapacitated by covid-19 and we wish him a speedy recovery, but this matter cannot wait for his return. We have learned from multiple colleagues, some at high level, that everything is being done to develop a service by agencies on the ground, but they will not be able to provide or sustain this without urgent and active government support.

The following are urgently needed:

- Enough drugs, syringe-drivers, pulse oximeters, oxygen, CPAP machines and PPE
- Enough trained staff, some coming from recent retirement
- Full government funding for palliative care charities, lest they continue to fail
- An organisational template, including wording of important communications
- Online resources such as videos and documents
- A public announcement to introduce the service

We envisage the public announcement could be along these lines:

"In response to concerns from many elderly and frail citizens who state they wish to remain at home even if they develop severe symptoms of Covid-19, the Government has instituted an alternative pathway for care at home. It is called the Covid Community Care Service and it expands our capacity to mitigate symptoms and provide appropriate care for those who wish to remain in the comfort of their home, and especially if the hospital service cannot manage the peak demand.

Care at home will be accessed through the 111 system (or another national number or via the GP contact number) with a rapid response team of doctors, nurses and carers who will follow a carefully managed regime of treatment. Staff already trained in giving specialised palliative care at home will be joined by doctors returning from general practice and nurses returning from community and palliative care nursing in addition to trained volunteer carers.

We offer everyone the option of being cared for at home if they develop severe symptoms of Covid-19, emphasising that many cared for in this way will survive. We have established a help-line (or GPs have counsellors available) for those who wish to discuss this option (contact number) and an on-line resource (website) with videos to explain what this option means and how the important discussions may be held and decisions made and recorded.

We encourage everyone to consider this option carefully, and to make a clear record of their decision, if they do, or do not, choose to be cared for at home."

Please act now to support those who are battling against the odds to put this in place.

Yours, with grave concern,

Dr Lyn Jenkins (retired GP and bereavement support volunteer – Chesham)

Dr Vivien Carter (GP – Amersham)

Sir Iain Chalmers (retired health services researcher – Oxford)

Dr Avril Danczak (primary care medical educator – University of Birmingham)

Dr Peggy Frith (retired consultant physician – Oxford)

Dr Iona Heath (past president of the Royal College of General Practitioners)

Dr Andrew Hoy (past president of the Association for Palliative Medicine)

Dr Sabena Jameel (senior clinical lecturer in medical professionalism – University of Birmingham)

Professor John Ledingham (retired consultant physician – Oxford)

Professor Richard Lehman (professor of the shared understanding of medicine – University of Birmingham)

Dr Françoise Lyons (GP – Sevenoaks)

Dr Anna Moore (respiratory specialist trainee and education fellow – London)

Dr Bryn Neal (retired GP – Amersham)

Dr Rachel Pope (GP – Stoke Poges)

Dr Stephen Shaw (retired GP – Monmouth)