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Patients are 'shunted like parcels' in the night

Pressure on beds means tens of thousands moved

Chris Smyth Health Correspondent

Tens of thousands of patients are being passed around hospitals "like parcels" in the middle of the night to relieve pressure on NHS beds, *The Times* has learnt.

Doctors and patients' leaders attacked the "dehumanising" practice of repeatedly moving vulnerable people when they should be asleep, which leads to longer hospital stays and puts health at risk. Ministers promised yesterday to crack down on needlessly shunting patients.

"Appalling" figures show that the number of patients being moved out-of-hours has risen by nearly 20 per cent in five years. One was moved 24 times at night during a long hospital stay.

"The biggest concern is not just the stress to the patient but the safety aspect as well," Dr Mark Temple, Acute Care Fellow at the Royal College of Physicians, said. "Continuity of care is central to quality of care and it's absolutely critical in terms of safety."

Freedom of Information requests were used to ask every hospital in England for the number of patients who moved beds or wards between 11pm and 6am.

In the 58 trusts that gave figures, 195,372 people were shown to have been moved at night last year. Many raised questions over the accuracy of their own data, and others admitted that they did not keep such records.

Among the hospitals that were able to provide five years of data, night moves have risen by 17 per cent since 2009, outstripping a 7 per cent overall rise in hospital admissions.

"It's just dehumanising and takes

away every bit of dignity," Katherine Murphy, chief executive of the Patients Association, said. "It's not very dignified and it's not very compassionate. Moving people in the middle of the night is so far removed from the idea of putting the patient first."

Last year the hospitals reported moving 20,003 patients more than once, with many reporting that the same patient had been moved four or five times at night. Lancashire Teaching Hospitals said that one patient was moved 24 times last year.

Dr Temple said that the figures were absolutely appalling. "One of the things that distresses patients most is the feeling that they're being passed around the hospitals like parcels," he added.

"Moving at any time is stressful but if it's happening in the middle of the night it's particularly stressful. They're surfacing on a new ward with a totally new nursing team that they haven't formed any relationship with.

"If a patient is elderly and frail they may develop a number of different conditions and may get shuffled around and that's not acceptable."

Dan Poulter, a Health Minister, said: "It can be distressing for patients and their families to move wards overnight and that's why we will be asking trust boards to see what can be done to minimise transfers which are not for good clinical reasons or to improve patient care.

"As the NHS continues to improve, we have more specialised wards, stroke services being a good example, so some of these transfers will ensure that patients get the best care from staff with the right skills. We would always expect

Continued on page 4, col 5



L'Wren Scott, the fashion designer and girlfriend of Sir Mick Jagger, was found hanged in her apartment in New York yesterday. News, page 5; Obituary, page 50

Putin shrugs off sanctions as troops move closer

Charles Bremner, Ben Hoyle
Juliet Samuel

President Putin is expected to hit back today after Western nations imposed the harshest sanctions on Russia since the end of the Cold War following Moscow's recognition of Crimea as a new independent nation.

In an address to the Duma the Russian leader is expected to shrug off threats of further punitive action, pledged by President Obama and EU leaders, if Moscow fails to pull back over Ukraine.

Anders Fogh Rasmussen, the Nato Secretary-General, said that he was worried about the increasing number of Russian troops on Ukraine's borders. "I don't see any de-escalation. On the contrary, I see Russian military build-up and this is a matter of concern," he added.

Mr Rasmussen's comments came after travel bans and asset freezes by the US and the EU on more than 20 elite Russian and Crimean officials, including advisers to Mr Putin, in retaliation for Moscow's seizure of the Crimean peninsula, and its declaration of independence from Ukraine. It is expected to become part of Russia.

Amid fears of an escalating economic war with Moscow, the Bank of England asked major banks in London to review their exposure to Russia and Ukraine amid fears that sanctions could have a knock-on effect on the City.

Mr Obama warned Moscow that it would face further financial punishment if it did not back down. Washington was "sending a strong message to the Russian Government that there are consequences for their actions that violate the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine," he said.

Foreign ministers in Brussels announced complementary travel bans and asset freezes on officials from Russia and Ukraine, and Baroness Ashton of Upholland, the EU's foreign policy chief, said that Europe must show its steel.

Europe has been divided between a Polish-led eastern faction pressing for fierce punishment and a conciliatory bloc, including Italy and, until late last week, Germany, which have counselled against confronting Mr Putin.

Sneering Kremlin; World, pages 28-29

IN THE NEWS

Childcare tax-break

Working parents will be able to claim a tax-break worth up to £2,000 a year for childcare in a move the Tories hope will dampen the row over the 40p tax band. News, page 2

Big bang discovery

Scientists hailed extraordinary new evidence for the Big Bang theory after identifying signals of the moment the Universe expanded 100 trillion, trillion times. News, page 3

Fatty foods less risky

Fatty foods such as butter and bacon may not actually increase the risk of heart attacks, a comprehensive overview of health research has concluded. News, page 7

Co-pilot's final words

The final words to Malaysian air traffic control from the cockpit of Flight MH370 before it vanished are believed to have been spoken by the jet's co-pilot. News, page 14

Seals seize oil tanker

A rogue tanker illegally loaded with crude oil at a Libyan port controlled by rebels has been seized by US Navy Seals in a night-time raid in the Mediterranean. World, page 29





Lord v Bishop Lord Coe practises rhythmic gymnastics at Charterhouse Club in Godalming, Surrey, before the "Clash of the titans" challenge for Sport Relief this week against the comedian John Bishop

'I was very ill and had no time to think'

Patients describe how being shunted around wards is degrading and often dangerous, reports Chris Smyth

"You do have this immediate reaction if you're woken from a deep sleep: your heart starts racing, thinking, 'what's wrong?'" Suzie Shepherd says. "Nobody should be waking you up in the middle of the night so you're thinking it must be horrible news. But they're just moving you again."

On one hospital stay, Ms Shepherd was moved between wards three times in the middle of the night, and she describes vividly the disorientation and indignity of being shaken awake to be taken by wheelchair down long, drafty corridors without any explanation.

One move was so rushed that nurses forgot to bring her medication with her or give her any water, and Ms Shepherd says that moves are more than inconvenient — they are a "fundamental breach of patient safety". They are, she adds, a symbol of the undignified and impersonal care that goes some way to explaining why elderly people are so terrified of going into hospital.

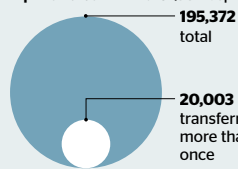
Ms Shepherd, 50, from Leeds, was first moved "in the small hours" when she was in hospital with intestinal bleeding in 2009. "I was very well established on the ward and very upset about being moved because I was so settled. The reason was that the emergency surgery bed was needed for the next patient," she says.

"I was very, very ill and I was sent sitting up in a wheelchair with the contents of my cupboard and hospital notes on my knees. It was all done in a rush. I didn't have time to think about it, it was just 'off we go'."

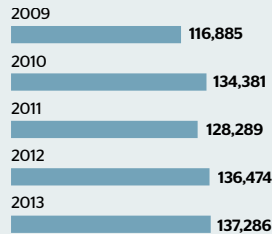
She was kept on a surgical ward for five days before being taken to an ordinary ward when doctors decided not to operate. "It was done in the middle of the night and the nurses weren't pre-

Sleepless nights

Patients transferred between 11pm and 6am in 2013 (58 hospitals)



Total since 2009 (41 hospitals)



24 most transfers for an individual patient, 11pm-6am, Lancashire hospital, 2013

57 hospitals which do not collect data

Source: Times research

pared for me. I didn't have my medication, didn't have a jug of water, nothing. "I'm capable of managing, but if I was elderly it would be confusing, unpleasant and totally unacceptable. It's totally unacceptable anyway. I rang my husband at home and asked him to ring the duty matron and tell them I didn't have any pain relief or anything to drink. They dealt with it the next morning by telling me off for calling the matron."

The third time she was woken at night to be moved, "I was thinking this is ridiculous. I'm one of those people who has to laugh and I thought it was like *Groundhog Day*. But in the back of

Q&A

Why would hospitals move patients at night?

There can be good reasons, for example if a patient arrives in A&E late at night and is moved from an assessment area to a bed. If there is no bed for that person in the right ward, another patient might be moved to free one up. The problem is caused by congested hospitals.

So, is it really the hospitals' fault?

Hospital bosses sometimes don't seem to take the problem seriously enough. For example, East Sussex hospitals said that they did not track night-time moves because it was "not considered critical to the care of the patient".

What can be done?

The best solution would be to slow the tide of frail, elderly patients going into hospital, and speed the tide going out. Better co-ordination with GPs and social care would stop patients getting sick enough to need to go to hospital and make it easier for them to leave quickly with proper support.

Is it really dangerous?

The Royal College of Physicians (RCP) says that moving patients between wards can add a day or two to their hospital stay because they lose a continuity of care provided by doctors and nurses familiar with their condition. Vital medicines or records could be lost.

What should I do if this happens to me or my family?

You can make sure medical and nursing

staff have done a proper handover so they know about your condition. Tell them that the RCP's Future Hospital Commission says ward moves at any time are often unnecessary.

How good is the data?

Variable. Hospitals provided the data in different formats, making it difficult to compare them. Some 57 hospitals could not provide figures at all. It is impossible to give an exact number for night-time moves.

Doesn't this sound vaguely familiar?

Two years ago *The Times* revealed that hundreds of thousands of patients were being sent home at night to ease pressure on beds. Hospitals have started to take night-time moves more seriously but today's figures show they're still used to ease congestion.

Ministers to crack down on switching

Continued from page 1

this to be properly explained to patients and relatives, just as we would expect NHS hospitals to minimise cases where transfers are not made for clinical reasons."

Research by the University of Cambridge published yesterday in the journal *Management Science* highlighted the dangers of overcrowding, finding that deaths rise suddenly when hospitals are more than 92.5 per cent full. NHS hospitals operate at an average occupancy of about 85 per cent.

Stefan Scholtes, Professor of Health Management at Cambridge Judge Business School, said: "When the tipping point was exceeded, patients began dying in significant numbers. We were shocked by the size of the effect... If, as the data suggests, one in seven deaths are attributable to high occupancy, when hospital departments exceed the tipping point, then we have a Mid Staffs situation in many hospitals every once in a while."

The Royal College of Physicians' Future Hospital Commission has urged doctors not to move patients around wards at any time, but instead send specialists to the bedside.

Dr Temple said that each ward move added a day or two to a patient's hospital stay. Hospitals were sometimes too willing to move people and "clinical necessity can be a bit of a get-out clause", he added.

Rob Webster, chief executive of the NHS Confederation, said the figures reflected wider strains on the NHS and social care. "This is a sign of general system pressure. If you look at pressure in the whole system it's going up. You could start by thinking this is just a hospital issue, but that isn't the case."

was blocking somebody else's bed, so that's how they dealt with it."

Personal contact with doctors and nurses who know her condition is lost to fit the needs of the system. "It's as if the patient is a parcel that's being moved on. You might as well be a Christmas present moving through Royal Mail. You are not regarded as being anything other than a thing that needs moving to enable another thing to come into your space. My mother has a similar condition to me. She's 69 and she will hang on and hang on because she doesn't want to go into hospital and deal with that impersonal approach to care."

my mind alarm bells are ringing in terms of patient safety. Wards aren't as well staffed at night and mortality rates are higher. Nobody's familiar with your condition." So unfamiliar that a nurse on her new ward casually told her about her inflammatory bowel disease; it was the first she had heard of having the lifelong, incurable condition. "It was horrible," she says.

Last year, on her most recent hospital stay, she moved at night again. "It does feel as if the patient is there to fit the system rather than the other way around. It was literally, 'oh my goodness, there's a bed available, we need to move you. I