

Abuse in care services for people with learning difficulties in Cornwall



- older people next?

In the light of recent revelations about the abuse in social care services in Cornwall, the R&RA¹ is gravely concerned that the regulatory authorities could now be failing to prevent similar abuse in care homes for older people. The Chief Executive of R&RA, Gillian Dalley, has written to the Secretary of State for Health, Patricia Hewitt, asking her to rethink her decision in March this year to reduce the frequency of care home inspections (see Appendix 1). The R&RA fears that more vulnerable people could be suffering abuse now as a result of this change which may never be brought to light. It wants more inspections rather than fewer.

R&RA is appalled that the abuse of people with learning difficulties in Cornwall developed under the eyes of national watchdogs² expressly set up by government to protect them. In addition, these same two bodies were responsible for investigating their own shortcomings and failures.

What's more, two years ago - when the abuse was rife - the key social services watchdog, the Commission for Social Care Inspection (CSCI), awarded Cornwall Social Services Department – the lead authority for adult protection and commissioning in the area - a respectable two star performance rating. Yet the joint report³ issued by the two watchdogs (CSCI and the Healthcare Commission) now condemns the same social services department for **longstanding failures** in community care assessment and collaboration with partners in the local health system, as well as heavily criticizing the local NHS.

The regulatory authorities must wake up to the dangers that face those vulnerable people whom they are there to protect.

Information for editors:

1. R&RA exists to promote the wellbeing of older people in residential care and their relatives. It does this through the provision of advice, information and support through its telephone advice line, campaigning for higher standards in care homes and project work to improve the quality of care received.
2. The Healthcare Commission and Commission for Social Care Inspection were established in 2004, under the Health and Social Care (Community Health and Standards) Act 2003, taking over from the Commission for Health Improvement and the National Care Standards Commission respectively.
3. The joint report 'Joint investigation of services for people with learning disabilities at Cornwall Partnership NHS Trust' is available on http://www.healthcarecommission.org.uk/db/documents/cornwall_investigation_report.pdf
4. The R&RA Chief Executive, Gillian Dalley, and Chair, Judy Downey, are available for interview by contacting R&RA on 020 7359 8148

5. Contact R&RA for membership details, making donations and information about its work by emailing: info@relres.org

Appendix 1.

R&RA letter to the Secretary of State

The Rt Hon Patricia Hewitt MP
Secretary of State for Health
Department of Health
Richmond House
79 Whitehall
London SW1A 2NS

14 July 2006

Dear Ms Hewitt

I am writing on behalf of the R&RA to express our grave concern over the revelation of serious abuse in care services for people with learning difficulties in Cornwall. We are particularly worried that this should have been happening during a period when efforts had been made by your Department to ensure standards would improve through the establishment of the regulatory bodies, CSCI and the Healthcare Commission (and their predecessors, NCSC and CHI).

The two inspection bodies are now calling for an audit of every care home for people with learning difficulties in the country. But this comes just three months after your decision to change the Regulations to reduce the frequency of care home inspections from twice a year to once every three years. The regulatory authorities argue that self-assessment by providers is a sufficient guarantee of acceptable performance. The R&RA does not agree. There will be too much scope for poor providers to hide under the cloak of self-assessment and, as in Cornwall, it will take too long for the inspection bodies to be alerted to what is really going on.

The Relatives & Residents Association – established to promote the interests of older people in care homes – is gravely concerned that the situation in Cornwall may be repeated in other parts of the country in all types of care services (especially in care homes for older people) as a result of this change and that it will be a very long time before such abuse is discovered.

Yours sincerely

Dr Gillian Dalley

Chief Executive

R&RA Letters to the press

Dear Editor

News of the abuse of people with learning difficulties in care homes and hospitals in Cornwall is all the more disturbing in the light of recent government changes to the Regulations dealing with the frequency of inspections of care homes and other registered social care services. From now on, instead of being inspected twice a year (one announced and one unannounced), a care home registered with the Commission for Social Care Inspection under the Care Standards Act 2000 has to be inspected just once every three years – with ‘spot checks’ only being undertaken in the interim if the CSCI has good reason to think standards are not up to scratch. But how will they know? Self-

assessment - which is what CSCI says it will rely on – is no way to reveal poor practice and abuse. Bad care homes all too easily become total institutions closed to the outside world. Cover-ups will fester and flourish. NHS services (as in the Cornwall case) are not even subject to the same level of routine inspection against Regulations and national minimum standards as are registered social care services. The situation can only get worse – CSCI is due to merge with the Healthcare Commission in two years time. The Relatives & Residents Association – established to promote the interests and wellbeing of older people in residential care – worries that inspection will become more and more remote and that the frail vulnerable people (mostly older people and people with learning disabilities) who are supposed to be protected against the risk of abuse and exploitation will become even more exposed.

Dear Editor

What have the regulatory authorities been doing over the last few years if such levels of abuse have been able to develop in Cornwall's care homes and hospital facilities for people with learning difficulties? The Care Standards Act 2000 established a new regulation system to ensure registered social care services meet a basic level of acceptable practice. At the same time, the Healthcare Commission was established to ensure NHS services came up to scratch. How were services in Cornwall allowed to go unchallenged for so long?

The two inspection bodies are now calling for an audit of every care home for people with learning difficulties in the country. But this comes just three months after the government approved recommendations from one of the regulatory bodies to reduce the frequency of care home inspections from twice a year to once every three years. The Relatives & Residents Association – established to promote the interests of older people in care homes – is gravely concerned that the situation in Cornwall may be repeated in other parts of the country in all types of care homes as a result of this misguided change and that it will be a very long time before such abuse is discovered.

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