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Ambulance 999 crisis saw dementia patient, 90, 'left lying on floor for 20hrs'

Whistleblower paramedic has also spoken about eight staff suicides as stress levels rocket

BY

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File stock gv of an Ambulance in action (Image: Birmingham Post and Mail)

A dementia patient in his 90s was left lying on the floor of his home without food and water for 20 HOURS because of a 999 backlog at West Midlands Ambulance Service, a paramedic has claimed.

And the angry whistleblower has claimed long hours caused by the delays have left many colleagues facing rocketing stress levels, with eight employees having taken their own lives in the last four years.

The paramedic, whose identity BirminghamLive is withholding, said: "The last two shifts I've done I haven't been to a 999 call that has come in that day. The only jobs we're going to are from the day before. I've never ever known it like this.

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"When I signed on recently, there were more than 200 outstanding 999 calls. Normally they'd be nothing, there might be 20. But we're so short-staffed and we can't meet the demand whatsoever.

"I cannot and my colleagues cannot continue to work 15 to 17 hour shifts."

[West Midlands Ambulance Service](#) (WMAS) said it could not comment on the claims about the 90-year-old without more details, but said it 'always prioritises' patients in life threatening situations.

It added: "Our staff and volunteers are working tirelessly to reach patients as quickly as possible, despite the severe pressure experienced by health services across the West Midlands, which sometimes means we are not able to respond to incidents as quickly as our patients would want.

"We are working closely with all local health services and NHS England to reduce delays and we continue to bolster frontline and control room staffing as part of a range of measures to help manage the current high levels of demand."

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The paramedic claimed a colleague had attended the 90-year-old patient who had been left lying on the floor for 20 hours after his family was told not to move him by 999 operators.

"He was an elderly chap with dementia who'd had a fall, he was laying on the floor," they said.

"Standard advice that the Ambulance Service gives to people is 'Don't give the patient anything to eat or drink'. Normally that would be because, in years gone by, we would be there in 20 minutes.

"I was told the family was so angry - that's not why we joined the job.

"But the Service is not doing anything about it, they just turn round and say, 'demand, it's demand'."

An alleged reported shortage of qualified drivers within West Midlands Ambulance Service (WMAS) is also another cause of the delays, they added.

Normally a paramedic would 'double staff' a vehicle with a trainee paramedic, who was fully trained to drive on blue lights after a 14 week course and four-week driving course, they explained.

But they claimed WMAS has introduced more Ambulance Care Assistants (ACA) who are given a more basic training course and are not trained to drive under 999 blue lights.

The paramedic said: "The ACAs are coming out with us in an ambulance uniform, but they can't drive an ambulance on blue lights or normal conditions.

"The paramedic has to drive there, do all the care, all the paperwork. We can't drive the person to hospital because if the patient needs paramedic intervention, the person we're working with (ACA) can't provide it.

"If the patient needs to be taken to hospital, the paramedic cannot do anything apart from request another crew - so literally they're sending ambulances to people for nothing.

"This situation has been going on since the start of coronavirus. I've not heard of ACAs being used in this way anywhere else in the country."

But WMAS said the service "has a paramedic on every front-line vehicle, ensuring patients receive the highest level of care from the moment we arrive. Where continued emergency care is required en-route to hospital, then a second crew should be requested to assist with this. Considering we utilise 130 ACAs out of 4,000 frontline staff, the amount of times this situation would have arisen would be minimal."

The paramedic also claimed the service had lost more than 50 staff in the last few weeks, which had also added to the 999 delays.

"They've literally had enough," they said.

A freedom of information report recently revealed eight staff members had taken their own lives at WMAS in the last four years.

Last month it was revealed 'stressed' paramedic David Cullum, from Redditch, Worcestershire, died in May after he had a disagreement about patient care with a manager.

West Midlands Ambulance Service had previously said there were lessons from his loss.

The whistleblowing paramedic said: "We've had eight suicides in the past four years. It's just not sustainable.

"I'm having phone calls with paramedic friends who are saying, 'I just want to quit, I just want to quit'.

"I'm turning up and I'm seeing this many 999 jobs and I know I'm going to have to do everything, I'm driving a four and a half tonne vehicle all night, I'm having to do everything and I can't carry on. We're not wimps as paramedics, we get on with it.

"The thing that annoys me is that the Service always has a get out clause, that 'it's the demand' that's to blame.

"But they couldn't give two tosses about the staff that are run into the ground.

"I am very concerned that so many friends and colleagues are leaving the system because there's so much pressure on them."

They added: "The whole system is broken.

"Suicides, paramedics burnt out, 50 people leaving in three weeks, an ambulance turning up which is not sufficient to deal with the situation.

"We had our quietest time during the pandemic because people stopped using ambulances. Since it's been lifted, the lid has been let off. I don't think we have addressed situations we should have over the last 24 months.

"Lower management knows how bad things are. But the higher management... all they are doing is working the rota harder and that is killing us all."

WHAT WEST MIDLANDS AMBULANCE SAID



Ambulance stock image

In terms of ACAs, the WMAS said: "The Trust has the highest skill mix of any ambulance service in the country and has a paramedic on every front-line vehicle, ensuring patients receive the highest level of care from the moment we arrive. All ambulance care assistants (ACAs) are in their final year of their graduate degrees and have been working on front line ambulances for as part of their degree course for the past two years, prior to being deployed into the ACA role. ACAs are only ever crewed with paramedics and can be left unsupervised in the saloon of the vehicle to monitor patients en-route to hospital. ACAs are allowed to deliver paramedic skills but must be directly supervised and only work to their current level of educational delivery, which will be different based on which university they attend. They are not allowed to administer paramedic drugs which includes controlled drugs. Where continued emergency care is required en-route to hospital, then a second crew should be requested to assist with this. Considering we utilise 130 ACAs out of 4,000 frontline staff, the amount of times this situation would have arisen would be minimal. In the event of a cardiac arrest, two ambulances are sent automatically as a matter of course."

About the eight alleged suicides, WMAS said: "One death is one too many. Like all ambulance service, WMAS is expanding the mental wellbeing training provided to all staff. The Trust now employs three mental wellbeing practitioners

(MWP's) who solely support and assist WMAS employees, the first Trust to do so. It runs Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) courses for staff, has a nationally recognised peer support scheme (SALS), and is providing additional training for managers on mental wellbeing/suicide prevention. As well as the MWP's, staff have access to Occupational Health, The Ambulance Service Charity, a 24/7 online mental wellbeing psychoeducation and peer support service and a wide range of online support and resources. The Trust is a national exemplar for health and wellbeing support provided to staff. In addition the Trust has recently been awarded funding from NHS England to further support Health and Wellbeing in the Trust. This will be used to launch a new health and wellbeing app, enhance the Trust's health and wellbeing website, purchase new health check equipment and increase the number of staff who are mental health first aiders."

Answering the claim staff had worked up to 17 hours per shift, WMAS said: "When the NHS is under severe pressure crews are often delayed handing over patients at hospitals which can result in late shift finishes and on occasions, crews not getting a break. We recognise this is not an acceptable situation for staff and are working closely with all local health services and NHS England to improve patient flow and reduce delays so that our crews can respond to the next incident as quickly as possible."