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Palliative care provision varies dramatically by where you live in England
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End-of-life care will become a legal right

Government backs law to ensure NHS coverage across England

[Kat Lay](#), Health Editor

Friday February 25 2022, 12.30pm GMT, The Times

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Dying people will be given an explicit legal right to healthcare for the first time in NHS history, requiring every part of England to provide specialist palliative care.

End-of-life charities said that the news was a milestone and could end a postcode lottery under which tens of thousands of people die every year without adequate support or pain relief.

New analysis from the charity Marie Curie shows that about 215,000 people a year miss out on end-of-life care and that without intervention this could rise to 300,000 within 20 years.

The government will back an amendment to the Health and Care Bill in the House of Lords.

Baroness Finlay of Llandaff, a professor of palliative care medicine and supporter of the amendment, said: “This change is incredibly important. For the first time the NHS will be required to make sure that there are services to meet the palliative care needs of everyone for whom they have responsibility in an area. People need help early, when they need it, seven days a week — disease does not respect the clock or the calendar.”

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She told the Lords that although “general basic palliative care should be a skill of every clinician”, specialist palliative care was a “relatively new specialty, which is why it was not included in the early NHS legislation”.

Service in Britain is patchy, she said, with hospices in many areas only able to fully fund support through events such as cake sales.

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The government amendment will introduce a specific requirement for “services or facilities for palliative care” to be commissioned by integrated care boards, responsible for local services under the government’s NHS reforms, in every part of England.

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Matthew Reed, chief executive of Marie Curie, said: “If you need palliative and end-of-life care today, the chances of you getting the pain relief, symptom control and support for your family that you need depend largely on where you live, your ethnicity, gender and on what condition you have. This is wrong.

“We welcome the news coming out of the Department of Health and Social Care. The impact of this legal requirement to provide appropriate care to dying people could be transformative — it is one of the biggest developments in end-of-life care since the inception of the NHS. This change has the potential to end the current postcode lottery and make end-of-life care fair for all.

“However, our campaigning will continue to ensure that the new integrated care boards are taking the change seriously and ensuring palliative care services are delivered.”

In 2019-20 only 46 per cent of areas met a target for fast-tracking what is known as continuing healthcare, a package of care offered to people in hospital who need to get home quickly, almost always because their condition is deteriorating. It should be arranged and delivered in 48 hours, but in northeast Hampshire the average wait was 12 days, leaving dying people stuck in hospital away from their loved ones.

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helping with the pain. My mam wanted to die because she was in so much pain. I know deep down she didn't want to die, it's just she was in so much pain. I found myself wanting it for her.

“It hurts me to think about the care mam missed out on but today's news is good as it hopefully means no one will have to endure the suffering we did.”

Craig Duncan, interim chief executive of Hospice UK, said: “The pandemic has shown us that how we die, where, and with what support is of the highest importance. It is absolutely right that palliative care services are put on the same footing as other areas of healthcare, such as maternity and dental services, and we warmly welcome the government's amendment to the Health and Care Bill to do just that in England.”

A spokeswoman for the Department for Health and Social Care said: “Palliative care is essential to support people at the end of their lives, which is why we have tabled an amendment to make clear that integrated care boards are responsible for commissioning palliative and end-of-life care services.

“We pay tribute to the campaigning work of Baroness Finlay on this subject over many years, and are grateful for her collaboration on this issue.”

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