

Care home inspector: how we fail the elderly

Former health watchdog member claims managers failed to act on findings detailing appalling and degrading treatment of frail residents

By Laura Donnelly, Health Correspondent

A FORMER inspector at Britain's health watchdog has claimed that elderly people are being left to suffer in appalling conditions because regulators refuse to act on warnings.

Rebecca Prideaux said poor care routinely goes unchecked because staff at the Care Quality Commission are given inadequate training. Workers are discouraged from taking robust action when they uncover risks to the most vulnerable, she added.

Mrs Prideaux resigned from the CQC in May, saying she had repeatedly urged senior managers to improve the training given to hundreds of inspectors who visit care homes and hospitals.

The former policewoman said she was put in charge of an inspection of a 120-bed care home the day after her induction finished, after witnessing just two such inspections previously and receiving no advice on how to draw up a report.

She accused regulators of failing to take proper action even after she warned of appalling failings in care and claimed reports often omitted some of the most damning failings.

Mrs Prideaux alleged that on one of her first visits to a care home "shadowing" an experienced inspector last September, she heard complaints that male and female care residents were made to wear each other's underwear. She claimed that her fellow inspector on the visit to Appleby House in Epsom, Surrey, seemed reassured by the justification from staff that, because the residents had dementia, they would not mind what they were wearing.

Mrs Prideaux alleged that the building smelt of urine, with staff saying they had run out of incontinence pads a month before and were using tissues.

"One of the complaints that we examined was about clothing being mixed up. Staff said yes it happens all the time – men in women's underwear and women in men's – but they've got dementia so it doesn't matter," Mrs Prideaux said.

When the report was issued, it only highlighted one issue, short-staffing, with no mention of any shortage of inconti-

nence pads or the sharing of residents' underwear. Care UK, which owns the home, denied the allegations. It said more recent inspections found the home compliant with all standards measured, and that it did not believe the quality of care on the September 2012 visit fell below the required standard in any way which was not identified in the report.

Under the CQC's system, new inspectors are supposed to shadow colleagues on nine or 10 visits before they lead an inspection. Mrs Prideaux, 37, of Epsom, claimed she was put in charge of a visit to The Grange Retirement Home in Chertsey the day after her induction.

"I will never forget what I saw," she said. "I went into one room and there was an old lady who was dying; she had a tumour and had been put on the Liverpool Care Pathway. She was crying out in pain, desperate for a drink and she was in an appalling state; filthy from head to toe, with matted hair and dirty teeth. She had no underwear on and had been left with just an incontinence pad between her legs, and was exposed from the waist down. There was no dignity."

Mrs Prideaux said the warning notices she drew up, stating that the home had unsafe levels of staffing and was failing to ensure residents' care and welfare, or to keep proper records, were overruled by senior managers. Instead, a report by the CQC made no mention of the failings Mrs Prideaux claimed.

The home's manager stated that Mrs Prideaux was specifically asked not to enter the room of the dying resident, whose husband was present. He said that detailed inspections by the local council and NHS into the care given to every resident in the home did not substantiate the concerns detailed by Mrs Prideaux and her colleague. CQC said a follow up inspection in July found that most of the improvements required had been made.

Mrs Prideaux claimed that in January she raised concerns with a senior manager that she should have more visits shadowing senior colleagues, and that soon afterwards managers began to com-

plain about her performance. On May 31 she quit, believing senior managers were determined to force her out. The former inspector, who served with Surrey Police for seven years until 2007, said: "When I joined CQC I was over the moon. I had cared for my grandparents and I really believed in a job where you could make a difference. In the end I was left feeling that if I cared, that was the last place you should be working."

Mrs Prideaux alleged that the system is so flawed that last month officials asked her to carry out a care home inspection, failing to notice that she had left.

A spokesman for the CQC said: "Mrs Prideaux's views of these services are not shared by the more experienced and specialist inspectors who worked with her. Mrs Prideaux had not completed her probationary period as an inspector when she resigned from CQC. Other new inspectors have been complimentary about the training they received. We are changing the way we inspect, particularly to ensure that all inspectors are specialists in the areas they inspect."

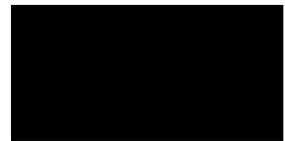
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Rebecca Prideaux said she felt forced out by managers after raising concerns



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Away days £800,000 spent on hotel bills

More than £800,000 was spent by the Care Quality Commission on hotel bills in the last financial year, official figures show.

More than 30 inspectors recruited alongside Rebecca Prideaux last September stayed in five-star hotels as they attended training days held in banqueting halls, she claimed.

Although the CQC has major offices in London, Newcastle and Bristol, staff were sent around the country to be trained, enjoying fine dining and swapping restaurant allowances for spa vouchers, Mrs Prideaux alleged.

She said that during the two-month training period, about six weeks were spent at hotels and conference centres, including the five-star **Montcalm** at the Brewery, in the City, which describes itself as an "opulent hotel" offering

exquisite service. Mrs Prideaux alleged that she and fellow inspectors, who were paid £37,000 to £40,000 a year, were amazed to be greeted by doormen in top hats, for training on regulating care for the most vulnerable.

Staff were sent to stay at the four-star Sandman Signature Hotel in Newcastle for several nights, so that they could see the CQC's call centre in operation, she said. The hotel offers "boutique-style" accommodation which normally costs £135 a night.

Mrs Prideaux claimed that when the training finished, the luxury continued, with monthly team meetings held at Barnett Hill, a country house near Guildford.

The CQC said it has closed 15 offices since 2009 to save money and often did not have enough room to accommodate meetings.

Flawed The failed inspection system

The Care Quality Commission's system of regulation – now being replaced – has been described by its own bosses as "totally flawed".

Under the system, "generic" inspectors without specialist expertise carry out visits. Rebecca Prideaux alleged that she was asked to inspect the MRI department of Ashford and St Peter's Hospital in Surrey despite having never "shadowed" a colleague carrying out such a task.

Earlier this year an investigation found that senior CQC officials had ordered the cover-up of a report that disclosed the regulator's failures in inspecting University Hospitals of Morecambe Bay Foundation trust, which was at the centre of a scandal over baby deaths.

In April, David Behan, who became the regulator's chief

executive last summer, promised a better system to ensure that more highly trained inspectors were sent into hospitals. However, documents seen by this newspaper show that three weeks before that announcement, decisions were taken to water down the inspection regime in the short term, meaning that organisations could be authorised as "compliant" with standards when few aspects of care had been examined.

The CQC's website claims that inspectors are supposed to assess a minimum of five standards for most services, but minutes of a meeting on March 27 show that the decision was taken not to specify a minimum number of outcomes at all. A spokesman for CQC said that in 80 per cent of inspections since April, more than five outcomes had been examined.