

Doctors face 'playing God' over who lives or dies if swine flu overwhelms NHS

By Beezy Marsh and David Derbyshire

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Thousands of patients could be denied NHS treatment and left to die under 'worst-case' emergency plans for a swine-flu epidemic.

The blueprint would force doctors to 'play God' and prioritise intensive-care treatment for those most likely to benefit - ruling out patients with problems such as advanced cancer.

The 'scoring' system would be introduced if half the population became infected with flu.



Football fans at Wembley stadium wear anti-flu masks before Friday's game between Celtic and Egyptian champions Al Ahly

More than 100,000 cases were diagnosed last week alone in the UK. Although the disease has claimed 30 lives, many sufferers have experienced little more than a bad cold, raised temperature and cough.

However health experts are concerned that the H1N1 virus could mutate into something more severe.

Detailing plans to ration hospital treatment, the report warns that if half the population were infected, 6,600 patients per week would be competing for just under 4,000 intensive-care beds.

Around 85 per cent of those beds could already be full with day-to-day emergencies.

To allocate ventilators, beds and intensive-care equipment doctors would have to 'score' patients on their health and prognosis as well as seriousness of their conditions.

Those who failed to respond to treatment would be subject to 'reverse triage' - in which they were taken off ventilators and left in NHS 'dying rooms' with only painkillers to ease their suffering.

Patients with underlying illness such as advanced cancer or the last stage of heart, lung or liver failure - and those unlikely to survive even if they were given treatment - would not be given an intensive-care bed.



A passerby casts an anxious glance at a group of students posing with anti-flu masks outside a London underground station

Leading doctors stressed, however, that the plans were unlikely to see the light of day and that swine flu remains a mild disease for most of those infected.

The report was published at the start of the swine-flu crisis in April, along with advice from the British Medical Association and the Intensive Care Society.

Dr Carl Waldmann, president of the Intensive Care Society, said: 'Even if we doubled intensive-care capacity, with a pandemic hitting at the level outlined in this report, we would run out of beds.'

'No one wants to think about this, and thankfully we are still a long way off this situation, but the ethics of it has been a big deal for doctors.'

Dr Tony Calland, chairman of the BMA's ethics committee, added: 'I seriously doubt we will get anywhere near a 50 per cent clinical attack rate, but if 25 per cent of the population were infected that could cause major problems for the health service.'

'The Department of Health is right to address this in the report and the NHS must face the issue, but many doctors would doubtlessly feel extremely uncomfortable if they found themselves having to face these kind of decisions.'

A Health Department spokesman said: 'We can't be certain how the current pandemic will develop, but we have to prepare for the reasonable worst case. Our planning assumptions are cautious scenarios, and not predictions.'

The Department of Health's 'slow' response to the pandemic will come under fire tomorrow from a parliamentary committee.

The House of Lords Science and Technology Committee is expected to attack ministers for delays in setting up the swine flu helpline.

The service for England was launched on Thursday but under the Government's own timetable, should have been up and running at the start of the crisis.

Stressing the importance of keeping a sense of perspective, Health Secretary Andy Burnham told the Observer: 'It has been a mild virus in the vast majority of cases.'

'If people are made unnecessarily anxious, it makes the lives of NHS professionals, who are already under enormous pressure, far more difficult as people become unduly worried.'

The National Flu Pandemic Service telephone hotline and website allows patients to secure the antiviral drug Tamiflu without seeing a doctor. The drug does not cure flu, but can ease its symptoms and shorten the length of sickness.

Patients are diagnosed with swine flu if they have a fever over 38C and at least two symptoms including cough, sneezing, aching limbs, runny nose and headache. Some have also suffered from vomiting and diarrhoea.

Patients are still being advised to contact GPs if they have serious underlying illnesses, are pregnant, have sick children aged under one, their

condition suddenly worsens or continues to worsen after seven days - five for a child.

Pregnant mother flown to Sweden for emergency swine flu treatment

A pregnant mother with swine flu was battling for her life after being flown to Sweden for emergency treatment.

Sharon Pentleton developed adult respiratory distress syndrome, a rare complication of swine flu.

She was taken to the Karolinska University Hospital in Stockholm because a specialist five-bed NHS unit in Leicester was full.

Patients included two other swine flu victims. Her chances of recovery are put at 50-50.



Vigil: Brian and Sharon Muirhead. He is at her bedside in Stockholm

Miss Pentleton, a care assistant for the elderly in Saltcoats, Ayrshire, is six months pregnant with her second child.

She and her partner Brian Muirhead have a two-year-old daughter, Kieva.

Last night Mr Muirhead, 30, was keeping a vigil at her bedside with her father James Pentleton.

Mr Muirhead: 'We are not thinking about anything at all except Sharon getting better. It is a very difficult time and I am just focused on her recovery.'

'They have been wonderful to us here and I know Sharon is getting the best care possible.'

'We just want to concentrate on Sharon.'

'The picture we have issued of her is one of my favourites. She looks absolutely lovely in it. I would do anything to protect Sharon.'



Grave: Miss Pentleton is fighting for life

Last night she was described by the hospital as 'critical but stable' in one of only four beds in the specialist ECMO unit.

Another patient in the same unit is a 22-year-old Swedish man who like Ms Pentleton has swine flu complications.

ECMO (extracorporeal membrane oxygenation) involves the patient's blood being circulated outside the body with the addition of oxygen.

The technique is used when a person's lungs are functioning very poorly even with ventilation and high levels of oxygen - and the patient's chances are rated as 50-50.

The ECMO unit is a modern purpose-built unit with security-controlled doors in a far corner of the children's wing of the hospital.

Ms Pentleton is monitored 24-hours a day by an array of equipment and a team of specialists.

She arrived on Thursday evening after Swedish doctors chartered a private jet to fly the two hours to Scotland to pick her up.

Crister Classon, a spokesman for the hospital, said: 'We are happy to help Britain or any other country if they run out of beds.

'It is a normal procedure to help other countries when they need it.

'We have only four beds and we currently have two swine flu patients in them, so there there are presently only two spare beds.'

It is thought a second British patient may be transferred to the unit.

The hospital's Dr Palle Palmer explained that the ECMO machine - similar to a heart and lung machine - was used to 'buy time' for patients.

He said people could be kept on the machine for up to two months, but added that most patients did not need ECMO treatment for that long.

He said: 'Normally it takes about two weeks, that's the normal treatment. But it is possible to run it for longer.



Karolinska University Hospital, Stockholm: Where Miss Pentleton is being treated

'It's not really a treatment, it's more like buying time to allow the body to get better.'

Dr Palmer added: 'We don't use it if there are other ways of treating someone. Every time we get a patient they are extremely ill.'

The Glenfield Hospital in Leicester, where doctors had hoped to treat Miss Pentleton, has the first designated ECMO unit for adults in the UK.

But because it was full - with two of its five machines already being used by swine flu patients- medics turned to Stockholm.

ECMO treatment has only recently been accepted into mainstream NHS practice, being regarded as experimental in adults until the completion of a trial six months ago.

Seriously sick children have been successfully treated for some time.



Best chance: Scottish health secretary Nicola Sturgeon said it was vital Miss Pentleton was transferred to Sweden

Consultant cardio-thoracic surgeon Mr Richard Firmin director of the ECMO unit in Leicester, said an average of 100 patients a year are treated there and beds could be expanded to 10 if absolutely necessary.

Patients are attached to an ECMO machine while their lungs recover from a variety of conditions, including viral infections and trauma.

It involves circulating the patient's blood outside the body and adding oxygen to it artificially,

Mr Firmin said 'The circuit is basically an external lung. Anybody who ends up with ECMO is somebody who is at the very severest end of lung failure.'

Patients may need treatment for two to eight weeks, at a cost of £55,000 to £105,000 per patient.

Professor David Menon, an intensive care specialist at Cambridge University, said a small minority of swine flu victims who need intensive care have suffered a direct viral attack on their lungs, rather than a secondary infection.

The condition called pneumonitis involves destruction of lung tissue.

He said ECMO treatment had been used to help swine flu victims in other countries.

He said 'It is used for seriously ill patients whose chances of survival are around 50 per cent.'

ECMO is used for conditions other than lung failure, such as heart problems.

Doctors in specialist units like Papworth Heart Hospital, Cambridgeshire, are currently investigating how their ECMO facilities can be used to help swine flu patients.

Read more: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1202386/Doctors-face-playing-God-lives-dies-swine-flu-overwhelms-NHS.html#ixzz0MRxxRc17>