

Care home owner warns of the decline of the 'great British nurse'

Omar Ahmad of the Sage Care Home Group fears for standards as service is stretched to breaking point due to nurse shortage

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Saturday 28 February 2015 22.17 GMT

Staffing shortages and the disappearance of the "great British nurse" are causing a growing crisis in private nursing homes, to the extent that one care home provider fears an imminent crisis.

Omar Ahmad, who owns Sage Care Home Group, comprising some 10 homes in Kent, Lancashire and Yorkshire, said the sector was at breaking point thanks to increasing red tape, a sharp decline in money available for the care of the elderly and the shortage of nursing staff. Ahmad said homes were closing all the time, just when the population is ageing and in more need of them.

He attacked the Care Quality Commission - the independent regulator of health and social care services in England - for "continually narrowing the goalposts" for care home providers, yet offering no support or help to those who wanted to do the best for their residents.

Ahmad is calling for better support for the sector, especially in attracting and retaining staff. "My care homes need a nurse on duty 24 hours a day. The local hospital will pay more than I can afford, and so I'm stuck with those who have perhaps just come in from abroad and whose English isn't good enough or who are lazy. I'd say about two or three out of five nurses are not up to the standard people expect of a British nurse."

Ahmad said he was fed up with seeing the sick and old being let down: "These are people's lives at stake; we're not playing with objects."

The critical shortage of nurses in the UK has been partially blamed by the Royal College of Nursing on a reduction in the numbers of training places available in 2010-13. It has led to an estimated three-quarters of England's hospital trusts recruiting from abroad. In 2014, one in five new nurses came from abroad.

With the NHS paying nurses more, and offering more public service benefits, than the private sector can afford, says Ahmad, it makes the shortage even more acute, while the NHS is moving to try to get more older people out of hospitals and into long-term care.

"We're happy to call other countries backward - I would call us backward in the way we treat our elderly. It's an absolute insult," he said. "We're all in the same boat and nobody speaks up for us. While all the rows are going on about who pays for whose bill, it is left to us to pick up the pieces. I'm footing the bill at the moment for a lady client whose bill stands at £42,000 as the local authority hasn't paid up. That is happening all the time, it's very common.

“We’re not Scrooges; if we can help, we will. But it is not cheap to run a care home; it’s not a hotel. Nor can you turn off the lights, or the heating, or the TVs to save on the bills. We want to extend the lives of our residents and give them the best care; we want them to be happy, but all the while the government is tightening up the welfare bill and local authorities arguing with families over who pays what.

“To have a successful care home, you need quality staff, and if you can’t get the staff it falls apart very quickly. Bad practice is allowed to flourish, and then you’re into the realms of neglect. In the past few weeks, two nursing homes I know of have closed down because of a lack of nurses. I keep hearing about homes being closed down - people are getting out.”

Nadra Ahmed, chair of the National Care Association which represents private providers, said she sympathised with Ahmad. The association is seeing at least three care-home providers a month selling up.

“We’re all fighting for staff from the same shrinking pool and hospitals win hands down. They want older people out of hospitals, but the funding doesn’t go with them. The provider sector isn’t listened to. Ten years ago, we were not seeing people with such complex needs in care homes, because they were looked after by the NHS. Now, as the needs have increased, the money has all been cut. We went from rarely looking after people who were incontinent to looking after people who were doubly incontinent and have dementia. So immediately we’re in crisis. The pressures are phenomenal.

“There have been some terrible cases that have also done an image-demolition job on care homes, which the regulator has not handled well. We’ve got men in suits telling us what to do, when at the core of our service it is women who care. This is a really difficult moment and no one is looking at the pressure under which a provider is trying to produce a viable service.”

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