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Call for care home coronavirus deaths in Northern Ireland to be disclosed as fears of 'clusters' grow



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Commissioner for Older People, Eddie Lynch

By Lauren Harte

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Health chiefs have been urged to be more transparent about how many coronavirus deaths have occurred in care homes across Northern Ireland.

The Commissioner for Older People, Eddie Lynch, was speaking after the Public Health Agency (PHA) revealed it has not recorded how many of the 78 deaths linked to the virus here have taken place within a care home setting.

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Yesterday it was warned that up to 16,000 nursing home residents are at risk unless immediate coronavirus testing begins. Patricia McKeown from the Unison union said care homes could become "Petri dishes" for coronavirus.

On Tuesday, Health Minister Robin Swann said there are cases of Covid-19 in 20 care homes across Northern Ireland. He said cases in care homes were being managed by the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority (RQIA) and PHA, but did not detail which homes were affected or how many residents.

Earlier this week a nursing home resident at Harold McCauley House in Omagh passed away after being diagnosed with the virus.

Six residents of Owen Mor Care Centre in Londonderry also tested positive for the virus last month. One of them later died.

The most recent figures show there are 484 care homes in Northern Ireland, with a total of 16,000 beds.

Last night the chair of Stormont's health committee called for dedicated teams to be set up to help identify and deal with Covid-19 clusters in care homes.

Asked how many deaths have occurred within care homes here, a PHA spokesperson said yesterday: "Currently this information is not collated in the current surveillance report, but as this is an emerging pandemic the systems used will constantly evolve and the complexity of the analysis will increase."

The PHA said the Covid-19 Daily Surveillance Bulletin records deaths reported by Health and Social Care Trusts.

The spokesperson added: "The deaths may have taken place in a hospital setting, or in the community or a care home, but must have been reported to PHA by the Health and Social Care Trust to be included in the report."

Mr Lynch said the Government needs to be "as transparent as possible" when it comes to reporting Covid-19 related deaths within care homes.

He added: "There is a lot of concern and worry out there but it's also important that even if people in care homes aren't being tested, if the likelihood is that they have sadly passed away through Covid-19 that needs to be recorded and reported on.

"We can't treat coronavirus victims in a care home any differently than those living at home. Their deaths are as big a blow to their families and friends as anyone else's. We need to be recording these cases as accurately as possible.

"It's important that all deaths are reported in terms of identifying where there might be outbreaks in homes so that all action possible is taken by the authorities to try and protect the remaining carers and residents.

"We have had confirmation from Minister Swann that 20 homes have confirmed cases but no record of how many deaths.

"The authorities do need to work on this and provide transparent information.

"I understand that they are under a lot of pressure but it's important that we get a true picture about what is happening - not just to report on those who have sadly lost their lives, but also to use that information to protect others within care home settings."

People Before Profit MLA Gerry Carroll, who sits on Stormont's Health Committee, also called on the Health Minister to state how bad the situation really is within care homes.

He said: "The situation with Covid-19 and our care homes is deeply disturbing and there must be swift action taken to support those who are vulnerable and at risk. Not only do we need urgent testing, isolation and tracking to protect both care home residents and staff, but we desperately need personal protective equipment (PPE) to stop the spread in these facilities."

Mr Swann said extra protective equipment is arriving and there is no reason why homes should not have access to it.

Ms McKeown from Unison said they have the least PPE and the most exposure. She added: "The homes have the potential to become Petri dishes for the virus unless immediate testing, isolation and tracking commences."

Sinn Fein MLA Colm Gildernew, who chairs the health committee, has written to the Health Minister asking that dedicated teams tackle potential Covid-19 clusters in care homes.

He said: "In the South they have established dedicated teams to help identify clusters and take action to carry out contact tracing and isolation to prevent the further spread.

"This is something we should be looking at here in the north in order to keep these vulnerable residents safe and to save lives."



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