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Covid-19: Staff absences in July surged amid ongoing pressure on hospitals

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NHS staff absences in England reached the highest peak in July since mid-April, amid continuing high numbers of SARS-CoV-2 infections and unrelenting demand for hospital beds.

In a joint editorial published last week the editors of *The BMJ* and *Health Service Journal*, Kamran Abbasi and Alastair McLellan, sounded the alarm at the current situation and lamented the government's inaction in tackling the "covid-driven collapse in services."¹

They argued, "The constant pressure created by repeated covid waves is already the main reason that the NHS is nowhere near reaching the activity levels needed to begin to recover performance.

"The nation's attempt to 'live with covid' is the straw that is breaking the NHS's back. The government must stop gaslighting the public and be honest about the threat the pandemic still poses to them and the NHS."

Given the current trends, the editors also questioned the government's assertion that the link between infections and hospital admissions had been broken.

July peak

Figures published on 14 July show that nearly a third of all NHS staff absences in England on 6 July were due to covid (26 874 of the total 84 426). London had the largest (28%) increase over the previous week (3292 on 6 July, up from 2574 on 30 June), followed closely by 25% increases in the East of England and the South East.² This was the highest peak during the current wave and represents a rise of more than triple since 4 June, when there were 8323 covid absences. But it is still below the highest level recorded this year of 64 000 in early January.³

Covid infection rates remain high. Latest figures from the Office for National Statistics show that one in 20 people in England (4.8%, 2 632 200) tested positive in the week ending 20 July 2022, down from one in 17 the previous week.⁴

The week to 25 July saw 10 121 covid related hospital admissions in the UK, and 11 914 patients with covid-19 were in hospital, all requiring treatment in segregated areas.⁵ There was a fall in daily admissions from 2005 on 11 July to 1345 on 25 July.

The most recent comparative data from 7 July showed that patients with covid-19 were in 9% of all occupied beds in England (11 8678 of 126 004), while the equivalent figure for mechanical ventilation beds was 7% (232 of 3472).²

In this most recent wave the numbers of covid related hospital admissions and the proportion of hospital beds occupied by covid patients in England peaked

in mid-July and have since declined slightly. Latest daily data show that patients with confirmed covid-19 occupied 12 113 hospital beds on 26 July, of whom 290 were on mechanical ventilation.²

In England and Wales covid was recorded as the underlying cause of death in nearly two in three of deaths involving covid (65%, 382 of 585) in the week to 15 July, an increase from 62% in the previous week.⁶

Death certificates mentioned covid-19 as a cause in 694 registered cases across the UK in the week ending 15 July, up from 529 in the week ending 8 July.^{7 8}

The BMJ asked the Department of Health and Social Care for England to respond to its joint editorial and specifically whether it could confirm whether it had managed to break the link between SARS-CoV-2 infections, hospital admissions and deaths, as health minister Syed Kamall claimed in the House of Lords on 11 July.⁹

A government spokesperson said, "We are making good progress on cutting longest waiting times—with the number of patients waiting over two years for treatment falling by more than 80% since February—and our community diagnostic centres are delivering over a million tests, checks, and scans to help beat the covid backlogs.

"We are rightly focusing testing on those at higher risk of severe illness, and our world leading covid vaccination programme has saved countless lives and continues to do so—with more than four in five of those eligible receiving their spring booster.

"NHS England has already begun preparations to ensure they are ready to deploy covid vaccines to those eligible as part of an autumn covid booster programme to ensure protection is maintained ahead of winter."

Office for National Statistics data also show that, as at 4 June, an estimated two million people (3% of the population) were now experiencing self reported long covid, up from 995 000 in the equivalent week in 2021.¹⁰

1 McLellan A, Abbasi K. The NHS is not living with covid, it's dying from it. *BMJ* 2022;378. doi: 10.1136/bmj.o1779 pmid: 35850953

2 NHS England. Covid-19 hospital activity. <https://www.england.nhs.uk/statistics/statistical-work-areas/covid-19-hospital-activity>.

3 NHS England. Covid-19 daily situation report. <https://www.england.nhs.uk/statistics/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2022/05/Covid-Publication-31-03-2022-v2-1.xlsx>.

4 Office for National Statistics. Coronavirus (covid-19) infection survey. Jul 2022. <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthand-socialcare/conditionsanddiseases/bulletins/coronaviruscovid19infectionsurvey/pilot/29july2022>.

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- 6 Office for National Statistics. Deaths registered weekly in England and Wales, provisional: week ending 15 July 2022. Jul 2022. <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/births-deathsandmarriages/deaths/bulletins/deathsregisteredweeklyinenglandandwalesprovisional/week-ending15july2022>.
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- 10 Office for National Statistics. Prevalence of ongoing symptoms following coronavirus (covid-19) infection in the UK: 7 July 2022. <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/conditionsanddiseases/bulletins/prevalenceofongoingsymptomsfollowingcoronaviruscovid19infectionintheuk/7july2022>.

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