

Nine health secretaries attack government for failing mentally ill

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Lord Lansley, Jeremy Hunt's predecessor as health secretary, is among those expressing "alarm and dismay" in a letter to The Times

Every health secretary from the past 20 years has condemned the "enduring injustice" faced by patients with mental illnesses and accused the government of failing to honour pledges to help them.

In an unprecedented intervention, the nine previous holders of the post say they are "alarmed and dismayed" that little has changed since the promise last year that the NHS would treat mental health on a par with physical problems. The last two chief executives of the health service join them in warning that "warm words" were yet to be backed by action to alleviate the suffering of families nationwide.

Their letter to *The Times* points out that children with eating disorders are being refused treatment until they become dangerously thin and suicidal. Rising numbers of patients in crisis are being "shunted across the country" because of a lack of beds, suicides by young men continue to mount and a "growing mental health crisis among young women" is unaddressed, it warns.

The decision by the former health chiefs to speak out reflects wider concern that people with mental illnesses are neglected in a way that would never be accepted for patients with cancer or other physical conditions. One in six adults are estimated to suffer mental health problems, with three quarters receiving no treatment.

Lord Lansley, Jeremy Hunt's predecessor as health secretary, and his fellow Conservatives Stephen Dorrell and Ken Clarke join former Labour holders of the post, including Andy Burnham, Alan Johnson and John Reid, to urge the chancellor to "make good the promise to achieve genuine equality" in next week's autumn statement.

Theresa May pledged on arriving in Downing Street to end the "burning injustice" that there was "not enough help to hand" for people with mental illness.

Two in five mental health trusts have had their budgets cut in the last financial year and more than £100 million pledged to children's services has not materialised, the letter says.

"Despite promised increases in funding, mental health trusts are still suffering cuts," it adds.

The signatories point to research which has found that 5,500 mental health patients had to travel long distances for treatment last year because of a lack of beds, up 13 per

cent. Specialist services turn away a quarter of young people referred to them. A fifth of women aged 16-24 have self-harmed, a rate that has tripled in seven years, yet support for children and young people is “going backwards in many areas”, they say.

The Liberal Democrat former health minister Norman Lamb arranged the letter. Other signatories include seven former junior health ministers and Sir David Nicholson and Lord Crisp, the last two NHS chief executives. Mr Lamb said: “It is a stain on our country that people with mental ill health are so often treated as second-class citizens.”

Jeremy Hunt, the health secretary, said: “We are making progress against our goal to address the difficulties faced by those with mental health problems — spending by clinical commissioning groups has increased by £693 million, every area in the country has put together plans to transform children’s mental health services, and our suicide prevention strategy is to be refreshed, all backed by added investment.”

There were reports yesterday of a patient having to spend two days on a trolley in A&E at King’s College Hospital, London, because there were no beds on the psychiatric unit. Figures showed that some parts of the country spent £2 a head on children’s mental health. Other areas spent 70 times more.

Health chiefs have said that a million more people would be treated for mental health problems each year in a £1 billion pledge to end “the separation of head and body”. Mr Lamb said: “Promised investment hasn’t made the difference many expected, especially for children and young people, where the majority of mental health problems begin.”

The Times has been campaigning to highlight the mental health problems among young people with its Time to Mind campaign.