# **Cancer patients may be at risk due to overstretched NHS staff, ombudsman warns**

Problem rooted in staffing levels and unsustainable pressure on exhausted employees, complaints body for NHS in England says

Cancer patients in [England](https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/england) could be at risk because NHS staff are overstretched and exhausted, the official complaints body has warned.

The parliamentary and health service ombudsman, which investigates complaints about government departments and the [NHS](https://www.theguardian.com/society/nhs) in England, said that between April 2020 and December 2023, 185 of 1,019 investigations relating to patients with cancer were upheld or partly upheld.

One upheld complaint related to Sandra Eastwood from York, who died in May 2022 after a delayed diagnosis of a rare cancer in the digestive system, called Gist, that has a 95% survival rate if treated. The investigation revealed that Eastwood’s scans had not been interpreted correctly, meaning she missed out on treatment.

“We found that had Mrs Eastwood been diagnosed when she had the scans, her Gist might not have spread, and she may have been eligible for surgery. By the time she was diagnosed, this was no longer an option,” the report said, adding that Eastwood also experienced poor pain management in the last months of her life.

Most complaints related to issues around diagnosis and treatment, including delays and mismanagement of conditions. However, some related to poor communication and end-of-life care.

Rob Behrens, the ombudsman, said the underlying problem was rooted in staffing levels. “Everyone deserves safe and effective care. But patient safety will always be at risk in environments that are understaffed and where staff are exhausted and under unsustainable pressure,” he said.

The [NHS long-term workforce plan](https://www.theguardian.com/society/2023/jun/29/government-aims-to-boost-nhs-with-thousands-more-doctors-and-nurses) was published in 2023, with [proposals including training thousands more doctors and nurses](https://www.theguardian.com/society/2023/jun/29/government-aims-to-boost-nhs-with-thousands-more-doctors-and-nurses) in England every year. The plan was welcomed by many experts as ambitious, but overdue.

However, the ombudsman, which published a report last year calling for a fully funded workforce plan with cross-party support, said the latest proposals lacked financial backing.

Behrens added that funding needed to be ploughed into the workforce to maintain patient safety. He said: “We need to see concerted and sustained action from government to make sure NHS leaders can prioritise the safety of patients and are accountable for doing so. A key part of this is investing in the workforce, for today and for the long term, including providing full funding for the long-term workforce plan.”

Sir Julian Hartley, the chief executiveof NHS Providers, also said long-term solutions were needed. “These findings lay bare the alarming impact of stretched resources on patients,” he said. “At a time when demand for services has never been higher, the NHS is grappling with over 110,000 staff shortages. Trust leaders are doing all they can to ensure timely, high-quality care for patients – their number one priority – but their efforts need to be backed nationally.”

Hartley added that the ramifications of pared-back staff and outdated equipment and IT systems on patients must not be sidelined. “Trust leaders [welcomed the NHS funding boost](https://nhsproviders.org/news-blogs/news/trusts-welcome-temporary-respite-following-nhs-funding-boost) announced at the spring budget, but deep-rooted challenges require long-term solutions,” he said.

“The government needs to commit to fully funding the long-term workforce plan and secure sustained investment for capital and digital infrastructure. This way, the NHS will be properly equipped to deliver the high-quality care that patients need and deserve.”

Eastwood’s husband, John, 79, said he was disgusted by the treatment she received from the hospital. “It seemed like the medical teams did not communicate with each other and everything felt very disjointed. They left her in agony for months before she died,” he said.

“The whole experience was very distressing, which is why I went to the ombudsman. I didn’t want this to happen to anybody else. Reading through their investigation report, had the hospital staff read the scans correctly and operated, my wife could have been here for another five to 10 years.”

A Department of [Health](https://www.theguardian.com/society/health) and Social Care spokesperson said: “The NHS has seen and treated record numbers of cancer patients over the last two years and cancer is being diagnosed at an earlier stage, more often, with survival rates improving across almost all types.

“We have invested £2.3 bn into speeding up diagnosis and launched 154 community diagnostic centres across England.

“The NHS Long Term Workforce Plan will boost the number of healthcare workers diagnosing and treating cancer, doubling the number of medical school and adult nurse training places.”