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EXCLUSIVE

# Corridor care crisis: Over half of NHS hospitals are putting vulnerable patients in public areas

**The NHS has told trusts not to treat specified groups of patients in corridors, but many are breaching these guidelines, as Sophie Borland reports**

Sophie Borland

Half of hospital trusts in England are breaching NHS guidelines on "corridor care" by treating vulnerable groups in emergency department corridors, including children, patients with mental illness, and those with physical and learning disabilities, *The BMJ* can disclose.

A total of 41 of 73 trusts said that certain high risk patients had been placed on emergency department corridors in 2026, even though NHS England has stipulated that the practice "must be avoided" for these groups.

Ten of these trusts had put children on emergency department corridors, of which one confirmed that the patients were aged 15 or under, show responses to freedom of information (FOI) requests submitted by *The BMJ*.

Last month the health and social care secretary, Yvette Cooper, promised to "eliminate" corridor care for children after the case of 2 year old Finlay Roberts,[1] who died after being placed on a corridor at the Whittington Hospital in north London in July 2024.

Experts told *The BMJ* they were particularly concerned about children being placed in corridors, in case staff missed rapid deterioration in their health, as happened with Finlay,[2] but also because of potential safeguarding issues.

*The BMJ*'s investigation comes as a survey of emergency department doctors by the Royal College of Emergency Medicine (RCEM) indicated that a fifth of patients, including some in a mental health crisis and children, experienced corridor care in early November.[3]

The college said that the "scale of the problem" of corridor care is now so great that it is not possible to protect any vulnerable group and the situation is getting worse.

Last December's guidance from NHS England stated that corridor care "must be avoided" for specific groups of patients, including children, mental health patients, patients with learning disabilities, neurodivergence, or autism, patients with physical disabilities, and patients who have dementia, confusion, or delirium.[4]

But FOI responses from 73 of 115 general acute care trusts contacted by *The BMJ* (a 63% response rate) show that 41 had placed patients from at least one of these vulnerable groups in emergency department corridors since 1 January 2026.

Nearly half the trusts that responded (36) had used the corridors for patients with dementia, delirium, or confusion, and 32 confirmed that they had put patients with mental health conditions on the corridors.

A total of 31 trusts said corridor care had been used for patients with learning disabilities, neurodivergence, or autism and 22 had used it for patients with physical disabilities.

Reacting to the data, RCEM vice president Russell Duncan told *The BMJ*, "The scale of the problem with corridor care is so great that it simply isn't possible to protect a specific group."

Danielle Jefferies, senior analyst at the health think tank the King's Fund, said, "Overall it's a very shocking finding. Unfortunately, it's not surprising, given how prolific corridor care is across the NHS at the moment."

Among the 10 trusts that had put children in corridors, North West Anglia NHS Foundation Trust said that patients aged 15 or under had been placed in corridors four times since 1 January 2026.

Hull University Teaching Hospitals NHS Trust, North Cheshire and Mersey NHS Foundation Trust, Royal Cornwall Hospitals NHS Trust, and University Hospitals of North Midlands NHS Trust said that the youngest patients to be placed on emergency department corridors were 16, and United Lincolnshire Teaching Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust said the youngest was 17.

Wrightington, Wigan and Leigh Teaching Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust said that children in corridors were all over 16.

Three other trusts—Surrey and Sussex Healthcare NHS Trust, University Hospitals of Morecambe Bay NHS Foundation Trust, and Newcastle Upon Tyne Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust—could not confirm the ages of the youngest child seen in corridors.

## Increasingly common

Commenting on *The BMJ*'s data, Ronny Cheung, officer of health services at the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health, said, "I don't think I speak out of turn to say that if you pretty much ask any paediatrician then this would have been a very rare occurrence even a few years back.

"But now it's becoming increasingly commonplace. It is definitely a thing we see regularly in a way we rarely saw before.

"They're outside areas that have been designed for safeguarding purposes.

"We know that children tend to hold their physiological status longer and then deteriorate rapidly. The ability to monitor sudden deterioration is more important in children than in adults, and if you're outside your normal clinical area that poses a potential risk."

Duncan added, "What we also worry about is that, because children by and large come with a responsible adult, then it may be they are asked to spend a long time sitting in waiting rooms, perhaps sitting on an adult's knee, rather than being put in a bed space.

"We're concerned that there are children who could be significantly unwell sitting in waiting rooms."

Last month Cooper said that the government would start collecting data on the number of children treated in corridors, and she has also asked NHS England to draw up "urgent new standards" for how children should be treated in emergency departments.

Cheung said the increasing use of corridor care for children was partly due to the growing demand on emergency services from parents wanting concerns "answered immediately."

He also believes that there is "greater low level health need" linked to poverty, poorer air quality, and worse nutrition.

In addition to the 41 trusts admitting that certain high risk patients had been placed in corridors this year, a further 14 said that they were not able to confirm that no vulnerable patient had received corridor care.

## Winter concerns

Experts said that recent interventions by ministers and NHS England have had little effect, adding that they were particularly concerned about the winter months ahead.

Duncan said, "The problem is getting worse. I don't think you would find anybody that works within emergency care or emergency departments that wouldn't say that things are getting worse."

Jefferies added, "It's worrying that we've had such high levels of corridor care throughout the summer. We're a bit anxious about the data heading into winter. It's quite possible we will see those figures worsen over winter."

Commenting on the scale of the problem, Hilary Williams, clinical vice president at the Royal College of Physicians, said, "Whenever you talk to someone who is frontline it's their biggest concern. It's terrible for patients, and it's really leading to staff burnout.

"It's very hard on the ground. People are trying to prioritise people, but if you're so busy and your space is crammed you don't have the time. The other factor is that those are the people who will end up with very long lengths of stay."

Latest NHS figures show that an average of 2718 patients a day were being treated in emergency department corridors in October, a rise on the 2549 reported in September and 2297 in August.[5]

The NHS first started publishing the data in June, and although the number remained broadly similar during summer it is likely to rise over winter.

The government has committed itself to ending corridor care by the end of this parliament, which will be 2029 at the latest.

An NHS spokesperson said, "Caring for any patient in a corridor is never an acceptable situation, especially when those patients are some of our most vulnerable, so we are determined to tackle and end corridor care.

"This is why we are supporting the hospitals that have the biggest challenges with corridor care and providing patients and their families with more ways than ever before to get the care they need either at home or in the community, away from busy A&Es."


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