1 May 2018

Dear Jeremy,

As you will be aware, recent data indicate that rises in life expectancy have slowed down. Improvements in infant and neonatal mortality have also stalled since 2013. [Source – Nuffield Trust, 2018]

The latest statistics on life expectancy also suggest that health inequalities are widening [Source - ONS; see also King’s Fund commentary.] Moreover, a recent publication by PHE reveals that, when standardised by age, the rate of deaths associated with epilepsy in the most deprived areas in England is nearly three-times larger than in the least deprived areas. [Source: PHE Deaths associated with neurological conditions]

Finally, academics have also drawn attention recently to a rise in deaths in the first seven weeks of 2018, compared with previous years. [Source: BMJ editorial March 2018]

We are concerned at these findings. Please could you therefore set out for us what you are doing to investigate the causes of each, and what action is being planned or being taken to address this.

Yours sincerely,

Dr Sarah Wollaston MP
Chair of the Committee
POC_1135514

Dr Sarah Wollaston MP
Chair
Health and Social Care Committee
House of Commons
London SW1A 0AA

- 9 OCT 2018

Dear Sarah,

Thank you for taking the time to raise these important issues in your letter of 1 May 2018 addressed to Jeremy Hunt. I apologise for the length of time it has taken to respond.

I share the Committee’s wish to know more about how these, and other data, can help us understand what is happening in relation to life expectancy and mortality trends, including inequalities. The latest life expectancy statistics published by ONS on 25th September highlight the complexities associated with the shifting patterns and reinforce the importance of ensuring we fully understand what is happening and what the contributory factors may be.

That is why my Department has asked Public Health England (PHE) to undertake a wide-ranging but focused review and report their findings to me.

Specifically, we have asked PHE to review recent trends in numbers of deaths, mortality rates and life expectancy in England, to provide evidence of any change in trend and to consider recent patterns of winter deaths. The review will consider trends by factors such as sex, age group, place of usual residence, level of deprivation, country of birth and by leading causes of death. We have also requested that the review consider available evidence for potential explanatory factors which may have influenced any changes in mortality rates, or affected patterns of winter deaths.

You may be aware that the Health Foundation and King’s Fund are also researching mortality trends in the UK, and the role of different possible contributory factors. I am intending to meet representatives from both organisations to discuss the findings, once I have seen PHE’s report.
One of my early priorities as Secretary of State is to focus on prevention. I am quite clear that our health is our most important asset and everyone deserves the same opportunity to live a long and healthy life. You will appreciate that much ill-health is preventable and, while personal responsibility is essential, government and the whole health and care system have a vital role to play supporting people to make the choices that bring them long, healthy and independent lives.

Yours ever,

MATT HANCOCK