

Dame Vera Baird QC
Victims' Commissioner for England and Wales

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Rt Hon Matt Hancock MP
Secretary of State for Health
39 Victoria Street
London
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Dear Mr Hancock

The National Confidential Inquiry into Suicide and Safety in Mental Health

I am in regular contact with the charity "Hundred Families", who support bereaved victims of homicide where the perpetrator is a mentally disordered offender. They have approached me, concerned and upset by a decision taken by the Healthcare Quality Improvement Partnership on behalf of NHS England in respect of the funding of "The National Confidential Inquiry into Suicide and Safety in Mental Health" (NCISH), a project which collects data and conducts research on suicide, homicide and sudden unexplained deaths of people who have been in contact with mental health services in the 12 months prior to the incident

This data has allowed the NCISH to examine the antecedents of suicide and homicide by people under the recent care of specialist psychiatric services, identify factors in patient care which may have contributed to suicide or homicide, and recommend measures for clinical practice and policy designed to reduce the number of patient suicides and homicides.

NCISH will no longer continue to receive funding from NHS England to carry out data collection, analysis, and research on patient homicide, although the funding for collecting data on suicide will continue.

The commissioning decision appears to have been taken without any notice, consultation, or discussion with stakeholders or families affected by patient homicide.

As Victims' Commissioner, this causes me considerable concern. Between 1993-2019 Hundred Families has identified some 1540 cases of people being killed by people with mental health conditions in the UK. NCISH's own research shows there are on average around 120 victims of homicides by patients or people who were mentally ill at the time of the offence every year. Many of the victims are children. Many are elderly and vulnerable, and many are patients themselves. Furthermore, these figures underestimate the true scale of the problem as they do not include those who commit suicide after killing others while mentally unwell.

Having met and spoken to bereaved victims arising from these deaths, I am only too aware of the devastating impact of these deaths on the families concerned. Following in the footsteps of my predecessor, Baroness Newlove, I am pressing for further support to be given to these families, at least, support that is comparable to that on offer to all other victims of homicide.

In light of the work we have done with Hundred Families, it has already become apparent to me just how variable and in some cases, wholly inadequate, is the level of engagement between mental health services and this particular group of victims. This decision to withdraw funding for research specifically for homicide whilst continuing to fund research for suicide sends a terrible signal to bereaved victims and only serves to exacerbate the perception of a service totally disinterested in their needs.

From a wider policy perspective, I am at a loss to understand why we are removing the funding from the one organization which is analysing this data in an attempt to identify the factors behind these tragic and in some cases wholly avoidable deaths. This research is specifically intended to find out what can be done to reduce them and there are still many areas that would benefit from further research. For instance, I understand that a number of perpetrators involved in fatal knife crime in London have serious mental health problems and the reasons for their specific vulnerabilities, actions and involvement in gang culture are poorly understood.

I am advised that the decision to cut the funding is due to wider budgetary pressures. However, given the extremely high costs incurred by treating a patient in a high secure psychiatric hospital (around £250,000 – £300,000 pa and with many patients remaining in high secure settings for five years and longer), it seems on financial grounds alone, rather short-sighted not to fund research which can inform the prevention of homicide.

We need to understand better what causes these homicides and how effective care and treatment can help avoid them. The failure to acknowledge and address perceived problems in the delivery of safe and effective care, can only undermine public confidence in the good work that has been done.

On behalf of the families bereaved by mental health homicides, I ask that you review this seemingly short-sighted decision and reinstate the funding for this crucial work.

In doing so, you will not only help to prevent future homicides, but you will also send a clear message to victims that their suffering and needs matter every bit as much as that of the patients.

In line with my usual practice, a copy of this letter will be placed on my website.

Kind regards

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'V Baird', written in a cursive style.

Dame Vera Baird QC
Victims' Commissioner for England and Wales