

CORONAVIRUS CRISIS: DEMAND

Why didn't

BY JILLY BEATTIE

TODAY the Daily Mirror calls on the Executive to establish a public inquiry into the handling of care homes amid the Covid-19 crisis.

Latest figures show more than half the deaths from coronavirus have been in residential facilities.

Fatalities are now 130 times the number of deaths in the general population.

On Friday NISRA stated 716 people had died with 380 of them residents of care homes.

Now families are demanding answers and say only a root and branch probe will satisfy them.

And the Daily Mirror is joining their call. They want to know why:

■ the virus entered care facilities before or in lockdown despite stark warnings

■ residents were sent into homes from hospital without testing, and

■ full staff PPE was not instituted from the start of the crisis.

They want to know how some facilities stayed free of Covid-19 while in others the infection has been rife.

And they also want to know why some relatives had to hear of deaths in homes where their loved ones were living from independent sources.

Mark Breslin's mother Elizabeth is a resident of Glenabbey Manor Care



Home in Glengormley, Co Antrim. It is run by Runwood Care Homes, which last week lost the contract for the Clifton Care Home in Belfast.

She has now tested positive for Covid-19 and remains "in isolation" without family visits.

Speaking yesterday, his mother's 89th birthday, Mark said: "Mum has vascular dementia. She is still very sharp but physically frail."

"She's had Covid-19 for between 29 and 57 days now. She first displayed symptoms on April 5 and we were told to prepare for the end."

"Our devastation was made worse by the fact we couldn't be with her. We prepared for her funeral and a week later got a call to say she was much better but still in isolation. We were delighted but could hardly believe it."

"I believe staff and residents' lives have been put on the line in care homes because proper PPE was not implemented at the start."

"We have had to fight for information. I was told on April 17 by email that six residents had tested positive and were showing 'minor symptoms'."

"Eight days later the Trust's Covid-19 crisis team was called in as the infection was described to me by a staff member as "rife" in the home. Then we learned 14 residents died."

"All people want is the truth. Even if they don't have the answers, then just let us know."

"If they told us they hadn't a clue



SCANDAL
Clifton Nursing Home in Belfast



INFECTION
Glenabbey Manor in Glengormley

how Covid-19 entered the home I'd accept that on the understanding they'd plan in place to cleanse it and keep it free from the virus.

"There has been something wrong from the start of this crisis in respect of the care homes. Now 53% of the deaths to date have occurred amongst care home residents who live in a population of about 15,000."

"We were told from the start, this virus hits older people and people with underlying health issues fast and hard. My question is why was more not done to ensure every single care home used full PPE from day one?"

"I was shocked to hear Pauline Shepherd, the chief executive of Independent Health and Care Providers, tell Stormont homes were made to accept non-tested patients."

"I was even more shocked when she

said they'd been told to employ "normal infection control processes" which is at most a plastic apron and gloves and not full PPE.

"We just want the truth and I want a public inquiry to find that truth."

"I've found most care staff good but leadership should come from the top so it's those people whose actions and decisions need to be examined."

"Action needs to be taken. Heads need to roll."

Health Minister Robin Swann has the power to establish an inquiry if he believes events have caused or are capable of causing public concern or if he believes there is public concern that particular events have occurred.

Mark said: "I see and hear a lot of deep concern about the care homes and how they've been handled. Mr Swann must show integrity and estab-

» How was bug allowed to ravage elderly facilities?

» Why were older people discharged without testing?

» Mirror joins families in calls for public probe

lish a statutory inquiry into this as a matter of public concern now."

Solicitor Kevin Winters, of KRW Law, Belfast, has written to Mr Swann repeatedly without response.

He said his clients want a judge-led inquiry without restriction notices or orders.

They want the probe to have powers to compel witnesses to testify and be undertaken within a reasonable timescale.

Families also ask for evidence, conclusions and recommendations to be published in full.

Mr Winters said: "They want an inquiry to establish if there has been a failure to protect people in care homes across Northern Ireland, including residents and staff."

"There has been a great

deal of confusion and inconsistency in reporting deaths to both the RQIA and the PHA and they want to know why."

"And even though the homes are in the private sector, the Department of Health owes a duty of care to all residents and it extends to ensure that care homes are supported in terms of equipment, testing, PPE and the protection of staff."

"Our families believe the DoH failed to discharge both its statutory duty in relation to care homes and its duty of care to resi-



QUESTIONS
Solicitor Kevin Winters