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when you have somebody who needs an off-the-shelf wheelchair, so to speak, not to be able just to go to a stores and pull one out.

ATKINSON

Wheelchairs, like cars, come in all shapes and sizes - there are the basic and cheapest self-propelled models or those which need to be pushed by a carer which can cost as little as £200. At the other end of the scale an individually adapted powered chair can be anything up to £20,000. But the shortages go right across the board and according to this stroke consultant, who's keen to point out that his NHS trust is doing as good a job as possible in difficult circumstances, it can cause big knock on effects across the NHS.

NHS CONSULTANT

It does have an effect on the total number of beds used in the system. So that if somebody, let's say, has a two week delay in hospital a hip replacement could be done in two weeks. If you take this over the whole of the NHS it may well be that there are a number of beds that are being held up purely because of delays in getting wheelchairs.

ATKINSON

We've spoken to several other NHS professionals including occupational therapists who agree a wheelchair shortage is indeed leading to bed blocking. But they were refused permission to speak publicly by their NHS trust employers. Some hospitals have now started to set up their own ad hoc system to cope with the bed blocking problem. Dr Robin Luff, a consultant in rehabilitation medicine, says, like a number of other consultants, he has been forced to devise an in-house scheme to try to keep patient discharges moving.

LUFF

The essence of the argument is that I have seen in-patients whose rehabilitation programmes cannot be started, let alone their discharged achieved, until they have a wheelchair. If there is a delay in provision by the patient's home primary care trust we will always try and help out at our acute trust because of attempting to reducing lengths of stay and on that basis we use access to all the wheelchairs that we hold, partly in our assessment stock, partly in a small working stock and partly

Peter Gage ending that report from Carolyn Atkinson. Listening to it Alan Jones, from the Kent Wheelchair Users Group. We heard there Alan from Kim Prior, who had to stay on in hospital for another three weeks because she couldn't get a wheelchair, is that type of delay typical?

JONES

I believe so. I did some - a little bit of research and I've actually found in the last six months we've actually supplied one powered wheelchair and six manual wheelchairs to enable people to come out of hospital.

WAITE

And that's in your group in one part of Kent?

JONES

That's in Kent but we cover the whole of Kent.

WAITE

Yes but around the country, presumably therefore, it shows a shortfall?

JONES

I think so.

WAITE

And does a sort of postcode lottery principle apply here as it does in some other NHS services - some places have got tons of these things and others not enough?

JONES

Yeah, yeah I think it depends where you live actually - some parts of the country you can get a wheelchair fairly quickly, i.e. like Brighton, in Kent we're running waiting lists on all our six wheelchair centres at the moment.

WAITE

One thing that struck me though, I mean if it is a big problem it's one that many NHS staff, certainly that we spoke to, don't want to speak out about - they seem fearful of saying anything.

JONES

Well I think most of us would be fearful of losing our jobs as a health professional. I think our argument has never been with the therapists and the managers, I think the real argument is really with the commissioners and the Department of Health under-funding and under-resourcing the wheelchair service.

WAITE

And apart from people in hospitals causing bed blocking who else isn't getting the wheelchairs they need?

JONES

I would think occasional users I would think probably go to the bottom of the pile. As I said their need is probably just as important as somebody that is a full-time wheelchair user.

WAITE

So this is a real problem that really needs addressing?

JONES

I believe so yes.

WAITE

Well I've been discussing our findings with the health minister Jacqui Smith, does she agree that there is a real problem over the supply of wheelchairs?

SMITH

I'm worried about anything that prevents us from ensuring that people get out of hospital when they need to. It has been a very important focus for this government and everything we're doing to reduce delay discharges means we also have to tackle this problem as well.

WAITE

Because you have, haven't you, set up a wheelchair collaborative - that would suggest you think there is a problem?

SMITH

You're right, I mean we do need to make sure that the service that we provide on the NHS, with respect to wheelchairs for those people who need them over a longer period of time, is as good and as efficient and as quick as it can be. And as you say that's why there are now 45 wheelchair services across the country working specifically on the wheelchair collaborative, learning from what - the parts of their service that go well, improving those parts that aren't so good, making sure that they share that information because we all want to see improvements in that service. And I think working together in that way is going to be a very important way in which we can identify good practice and make sure that it's spread everywhere.

WAITE

Now in this report we phoned around a lot of NHS staff all around the country, all were agreed this is a problem and all said it was contributing unhelpfully to their jobs but not one of them would agree to be named minister, do you find it acceptable - health professionals pointing to problems which could help the NHS to become more efficient are actually scared to be named, to do so in public, for fear of disciplinary action?

SMITH

Well I mean I would find it very unacceptable if I thought that that was the reason. I think the solution often lies with the staff and the users of the service themselves, which is why the wheelchair collaborative does precisely bring together those users and staff to be able to identify the problems and to look at how we need to solve them.

WAITE

And can you guarantee minister that any NHS member of staff who thinks this is a problem won't be disciplined if they come out in public and say that it's a problem and highlight the problem that is for them?

SMITH

Well this is the government that not only changed legislation with respect to whistle blowing but gave clear guidance to the NHS about their policy with respect to whistle blowers ...

WAITE

But is that a yes or a no minister - are you going to discipline if they talk in public or are you not?

SMITH

Of course people shouldn't be disciplined if they're raising issues about how we improve services in public and if anybody who believes that that's happened to them would like to contact me personally I will certainly pursue it.

WAITE

The health minister Jacqui Smith. Well Dr Andrew Frank is clinical chair of the government's wheelchair collaborative, that we just mentioned there, he joins us too. You Dr Frank have got the task of helping to sort this out. How are you going about it?

FRANK

We've looked at the process involved in providing wheelchairs from how do I get hold of a

WAITE

Okay, there we'll have to leave it. Dr Andrew Frank, Alan Jones thank you both.