
Director General for Regulation

Inas Ahmed

9 March 2016

Dear Inas

Thank you for your email of 27 February regarding statements made by the Prime Minister about weekend mortality statistics during Prime Minister's Questions on 24 February.

In your email you refer to two figures (6,000 and 11,000) quantifying the number of "unnecessary" deaths over the weekend. You are right to say that the definition of the weekend in the British Medical Journal (BMJ) article on mortality statistics in hospitals on weekends, from which the 11,000 figure is taken, includes Friday and Monday. I would also like to clarify that the BMJ article, discusses 'excess deaths' rather than unnecessary deaths. Excess deaths, in this context, refers to the additional number of people who die each year within 30 days of admission to hospital between Friday and Monday compared with those admitted on other days of the week.

In considering this issue since it first arose in July 2015, the Authority has focussed on two important principles:

- the source and methodology of any statistical claim used in public debate should be clear and available equally for all to read and review (equality of access)
- public organisations should be careful not to imply causal links between different phenomena where the evidence is unclear or under-developed (causality)

On the principle of equality of access, the 6,000 figure was taken from a separate analysis which was initially published as an [ad hoc release](#) by the Department of Health in July 2015 following a speech by the Secretary of State for Health in which the previously unpublished figure was used. Shortly after the ad hoc release was published, the Authority [wrote to Mark Svenson](#), the Head of Profession for Statistics at the Department of Health, and encouraged further information to be provided so that users would be able to understand the source of the estimate and how it differs from prior estimates. The information subsequently provided by the Department of Health can be found [here](#). The analysis estimated excess in-hospital deaths associated with admission on Saturday or Sunday compared with Wednesday was 5,745.

On the principle of causality, in [previous correspondence](#) related to the BMJ article^[1] on mortality in hospitals on weekends, we have been clear that the article concluded that a

^[1] Freemantle, N et al, 2015, Increased mortality associated with weekend hospital admission: a case for expanded seven day services?, BMJ 2015;351:h4596.

causal link had not been established between the weekend mortality rates it highlights, and the nature of service provision at the weekend. We also contacted the Department of Health to ask that future references to this article are clear about the difference between implying a causality that the article does not demonstrate, and describing the conclusions reached by the authors. In this instance, we are satisfied that the Prime Minister's comment did not imply causality.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Ed Humpherson', with a stylized, cursive script.

Ed Humpherson