

Sleep services in the UK at breaking point

13th March 2020, Oxford – A new survey of the UK's leading sleep centres, released to coincide with World Sleep Day, has highlighted 'concerning' delays in diagnosing and treating patients with poor quality of sleep. Some centres reported waiting times of up to two years, and one is even considering closing to new referrals for a temporary period, to help address waiting times. The survey has led to a call for additional funding to address the mounting challenges faced by sleep services.

The survey, which reviewed current referral waiting times for Obstructive Sleep Apnoea (OSA) in some of the UK's leading sleep units, was carried out by the OSA Alliance, a group comprising the UK's leading specialist sleep organisations and patient groups. OSA is an increasingly common condition, characterised by interruptions in an individual's breathing whilst asleep due to partial or total closure of the airway. OSA is easily and effectively treated using a device called CPAP (Continuous Positive Airway Pressure), which keeps the airway open and thereby prevents these interruptions.

Dr. Annabel Nickol, Respiratory Consultant and Lead of the Sleep and Ventilation service in Oxford, says, "There is a crisis facing sleep services in the UK, which means patients face long waiting times for treatment. We have a situation in Oxford where demand is rising to such a level that we simply can't keep up with the increasing number of patients referred."

"Despite expanding our service, the number of patients seeking treatment outpaces our capacity to diagnose and treat them and without further expansion, we face some significant breaches to our waiting time targets. This means that patients will endure their disabling symptoms much longer than is necessary."

Most people experience sleep issues at some point in their life and whilst most are temporary, for a growing number disturbed sleep has a significant impact on their daily lives. When this happens, timely treatment is essential to enable good quality sleep and prevent worsening any co-morbidities, which include diabetes, depression and increased risk of cardiovascular disease.

Professor John Stradling, Emeritus Professor at Oxford University, says, "Sleep is fundamental to human health and wellbeing. A conservative estimate is that 1.75 million people in the UK have a

moderate or severe form of OSA that would benefit from treatment and that, if left unchecked, will have a detrimental impact on their overall health and quality of life.

“In addition, because there is an impact on alertness and concentration, the chance of having a road traffic accident is considerably increased if an individual continues to drive with untreated OSA. It is essential therefore that those suffering from OSA, and other sleep related conditions, get the support and treatment they need as soon as possible, so they are safe on the road.”

The new findings are supported by the data from the NHS improvement programme ‘Getting it Right First Time’ (GIRFT), which was set up to improve quality of care and which confirms there are unacceptable delays in patients being both diagnosed and treated for sleep problems.

The OSA Alliance is calling for urgent additional funding for sleep services, in parallel with a robust staff recruitment and training programme, to support patients who need treatment to improve their overall health and life expectancy, to reduce the possibility of road traffic accidents.

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Notes to Editors:

Obstructive Sleep Apnoea (OSA)

OSA is a condition that is thought to affect up to a quarter of the UK adult population. However approximately one in twenty adults in the UK are believed to have a moderate or severe form which would benefit from CPAP treatment.

OSA often goes undiagnosed but if someone has OSA with symptoms, and it is not treated, this can be very detrimental to their general health. It can significantly reduce quality of life and, when causing sleepiness or related symptoms, can be a risk factor for road traffic accidents.

Sleepiness is implicated as a major contributory factor in up to 20% of motorway traffic accidents and is associated with an increase in the severity of an accident, as driver reactions are impaired.

If you have OSA, you can have pauses in breathing whilst asleep, which can happen hundreds of times a night. This means you’re getting less of the restorative kind of sleep required to enable you to perform with the levels of energy and concentration you would otherwise enjoy. CPAP is a simple and effective treatment for OSA, which is well tolerate and frequently transformative for patients.

The rise in OSA has been linked to rising levels of obesity and to modern lifestyles.

The OSA Alliance

Members include:

Academy for Healthcare Science

The Association for Respiratory Technology and Physiology (ARTP)

The British Thoracic Society (BTS) Sleep Advisory Group

The British Sleep Society (BSS)

The OSA Partnership Group

The Sleep Apnoea Trust (SATA)