

39 Victoria Street London SW1H 0EU

Andrew J Cox HM Senior Coroner H.M Coroner's Office Pydar House Pydar Street Truro Cornwall TR1 1XU

12 April 2024

Dear Mr Cox,

Thank you for your letter of 24 November to the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care regarding the Prevention of Future Death reports of Patricia Joan Steggles, John Charles Seagrove and Pauline Mary Humphris. I am replying as Minister with responsibility for Urgent and Emergency Care. Please accept my sincere apologies for the significant delay in responding to this matter. I would like to assure you that the department is mindful of the statutory responsibilities in relation to prevention of future deaths reports and we are prioritising responses as a matter of urgency.

Firstly, I would like to say how saddened I was to read of the circumstances of the deaths of Mrs Steggles, Mr Seagrove and Mrs Humphris. I offer my sincere condolences to their families and loved ones.

Your report raises concerns about the response time performance of the South Western Ambulance Service NHS Foundation Trust (SWAST), ambulances queueing as a result of patient handover delays at the Royal Cornwall Hospital, and the pressures being felt by paramedics, nurses and doctors. You have also raised these concerns with the ambulance service and the hospital trust, as well as with the local Integrated Care Board as copied interested parties. These NHS organisations are best placed to respond on the specific action being taken locally to improve urgent and emergency care services.

As the Minister responsible for urgent and emergency case services, I recognise the significant pressure the urgent and emergency care system is facing. That is why we published our 'Delivery plan for recovering urgent and emergency care services' which aims to deliver sustained improvements in waiting times, including to reduce Category 2 response times (including for serious conditions such as heart attacks and strokes) to 30 minutes on average this year. The plan is available at <a href="https://www.england.nhs.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/B2034-delivery-plan-for-recovering-urgent-and-emergency-care-services.pdf">https://www.england.nhs.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/B2034-delivery-plan-for-recovering-urgent-and-emergency-care-services.pdf</a>

A primary aim of our delivery plan is to boost ambulance capacity. Ambulance services received £200 million of additional funding in 2023/24 to expand capacity and improve response times, and we are maintaining this additional capacity in 2024/25. This is alongside

the delivery of new ambulances and specialist mental health vehicles. With more ambulances on the road, patients will receive the treatment they need more swiftly.

I recognise that ambulance trusts work within a health and care system and issues such as delayed patient handovers to hospitals can impact on capacity and response times. That is why a key part of the delivery plan is about improving patient flow and bed capacity within hospitals. We achieved our 2023/24 ambition of delivering 5,000 more staffed, permanent hospital beds this year compared to 2022-23 plans, backed by £1 billion of dedicated funding, and we will maintain this capacity uplift in 2024/25. Further, we also achieved our target of scaling up virtual ward bed capacity to over 10,000 ahead of winter 2023/24, and there are now over 11,000 beds available nationally. We also have provided £1.6 billion of funding over two years to support the NHS and local authorities to ensure timely and effective discharge from hospital. These measures are helping improve patient flow through hospitals, reducing delays in patient handovers so ambulances can swiftly get back on the roads.

Regarding staffing capacity, we have made significant investments in the ambulance workforce – the number of NHS ambulance staff and support staff has increased by over 50% since 2010. To help ensure we have the ambulance workforce to meet the future demands on the service, the NHS Long Term Workforce Plan sets out plans to boost the number of paramedics by up to 15,600 to deliver services in ambulance and other care settings. I understand that SWAST have recently implemented strategies to support the wellbeing of their staff.

At a national level, we have seen significant improvements in performance this year compared to last year. In winter 2023-24, average Category 2 ambulance response times were over 12 minutes faster compared to the same period last year, a reduction of nearly 25%. SWAST average Category 2 response times were over 33 minutes faster compared to the same time period last year, a 42% reduction. However, I recognise there is still more to do to reduce response times down further and back towards pre-pandemic levels – and this is the action we will continue to be taking as part of the government's commitment to improving NHS services and reducing waiting times.

Both South Western Ambulance Service and NHS Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly ICB are in Tier 1 of the urgent and emergency care recovery plan tiering support approach. This means that NHS England provides bespoke support to them to help improve performance and reduce variation.

In preparing this response, Departmental officials have also made enquiries with the Care Quality Commission (CQC). I have been assured that the CQC will continue to have regular meetings with the NHS trusts locally to monitor risks and follow up on Prevention of Future Death reports.

Thank you once again for bringing these important issues to my attention.

Yours,



**HELEN WHATELY**