

power is the only way of making these...

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Ambulances in crisis

THE London Ambulance Service gets more calls now than it has ever done, about 35,000 a week, and the result is that the service is sometimes dangerously slow to respond to calls from critically ill people. As we report today, in up to seven London boroughs a month, in more than half of cases emergency ambulances fail to respond to 999 calls within the NHS target of eight minutes. In London overall, the response to serious emergency calls within the target time fell from 81 per cent during March to 64 per cent in October. In some cases the problem is exacerbated by the shortage of space in A&E departments: ambulance crews may wait up to an hour before they are able to bring a patient into a hospital.

This is a genuinely disturbing development, with life-threatening implications. There are plans to increase the numbers of paramedics to meet rising demand; it can't happen too quickly. Yet we too must play our part: the service says that it is beset with frivolous 999 calls from people with trivial complaints. That has to stop.

Ambulance service needs our support

AS YOUR report last week on the London Ambulance Service revealed, while those with life-threatening conditions usually get the attention they need, a large number of seriously ill people are waiting unreasonably long for the expert care that the LAS should provide.

Paramedics often work 12-hour shifts day after day, and if there is an emergency at the end of a shift they might work 13 or more hours in a day. They are London's unsung heroes but the pressure on them is too great; many are exhausted and every week several leave the service for higher-paid, less stressful jobs elsewhere.

We need action now. Health minister Earl Howe should publicly state his commitment to our emergency ambulance services, ensuring paramedics are paid a wage that enables them to live in London.

The boss of NHS England, Simon Stevens, should stop wasting money on consultants doing more research into ambulance services and guarantee that the LAS has the resources it needs.

The LAS must make sure that all paramedics feel valued and respected, and focus on recruitment. Long-term sustainability of the paramedic workforce requires active and continuous recruitment – neglecting this process and then recruiting from Australia (as the LAS is now doing) is no long-term answer to our problems.

Malcolm Alexander, chair, Patients' Forum for the London Ambulance Service