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Human Cost Of A Serco Bargain

The damage done by the cut-price privatisation of Suffolk NHS community services is becoming increasingly clear, with contractors Serco facing legal action over the critical condition of an elderly woman.

Joy Saunders fell from her bed at Bluebird Lodge Community Hospital and suffered a brain haemorrhage. Lawyers acting for her family say that her husband had asked for bed rails to be fitted before the fall because of Mrs Saunders' distressed condition. The lawyers allege that after she was found on the floor, she was not adequately examined until two days later despite obvious injuries. Serco is also accused of taking no further interest in Mrs Saunders' condition.

The fall took place a year ago. After the brain haemorrhage Mrs Saunders needed 24-hour care and is now in a hospice.

News of the expected legal action came a few days after local NHS commissioning groups (CCGs) confirmed they had issued two contract queries to Serco over its running of Suffolk's community health services. According to the Press Association, the queries relate to failure to meet data quality and access standards and failure to achieve required response times. Serco is known to have failed to meet 49 performance indicators out of 188.

The Health Service Journal has reported that Serco has been asking NHS organisations to help it out by lending it some staff. Serco is struggling to recruit in Suffolk, with 72 vacancies unfilled. Just weeks after the contract began last year, Serco cut 137 jobs.

Last month BBC Radio 4's File on Four programme featured Serco's failings in Suffolk in an examination of NHS commissioning following the government's Health and Social Care Act. The programme found overstretched staff and a community intervention service that lacked staff to cover its night shifts.

Serco under bid the former NHS trust by £10 million on the three-year £140 million contract. It does not expect to make a profit on the deal.

According to the Health Service Journal, issues raised with Serco by the NHS Ipswich and East Suffolk Clinical Commissioning Group include staff capacity, skill mix, workload, succession planning and morale, training, communication, mobile working, care co-ordination centre processes, incidents and near-miss incidents.

HSJ quotes Tracey Lambert of Unison trades union saying: "Once again, the privatisation of a previously excellent NHS service has caused damage to patient care. Serco ought to be sacked and the services brought back into the NHS, to prevent further damage."

Serco has recently dropped out of the bidding for an NHS community contract for Cambridgeshire valued at £800 million. Outside the health field, Serco has been under criminal investigation along with G4S for overcharging the Government for electronic

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tagging of offenders. The allegations include charging for tagging offenders who were dead, in prison or had never been tagged.