

Oral statement on David Fuller

Mr Speaker, with permission, I'd like to make a statement on the appalling crimes committed by David Fuller – and the government's next steps.

In recent days, the courts have heard about a series of David Fuller's shocking and depraved offences. The legal process is ongoing as you have just said Mr Speaker.

David Fuller is yet to be sentenced so there are some things it would be inappropriate for me to talk about at this time.

I'm sure the House will understand why the majority of my statement will focus on the steps we're taking in response to these crimes and not the crimes themselves.

But before I do so, I will briefly update the House on this shocking case.

In December last year, David Fuller was charged with the murder of two young women, Wendy Knell and Caroline Pierce, in the Tunbridge Wells area of Kent in 1987.

Last week he pleaded guilty to their murders.

My thoughts, and I'm sure the thoughts of the whole House, are with Wendy and Caroline's family and friends. As well as this, the Kent and Essex Serious Crime Directorate has been carrying out an investigation into his offences in hospital settings, between 2008 and 2020.

As a result, Fuller was charged with a series of shocking offences, involving sexual offences committed in a hospital mortuary.

And he has also pleaded guilty to these offences.

As sentencing has yet to take place it would be inappropriate for me to comment on the particular case. But I will say this, in light of what has happened, the Justice Secretary will be looking at whether the sentencing that is currently available for such egregious sexual offences is appropriate.

Mr Speaker, it has taken months of painstaking work to uncover the extent of this man's offending.

And the fact that these offences took place in a hospital – a place where all of us should feel safe and free from harm – makes this case all the more harrowing.

This has been an immensely distressing investigation and I would like to thank the Police for the diligent and sensitive way they've approached it.

They've shown the utmost professionalism in the most upsetting of

circumstances and I would like to thank them for their work.

I would also like to thank the local NHS Trust – Maidstone and Tunbridge Wells – for co-operating so closely with the Police.

Mr Speaker, officers have tragically found evidence of 100 victims.

Of these victims, 81 have been formally identified, and specially trained family liaison officers have been supporting their families.

Every family of a known victim has been contacted.

We've been working closely with the Police, the Police and Crime Commissioner, and the NHS trust to make sure that those families who've been directly affected receive the 24/7 support that they need including access to dedicated caseworkers and mental health support and counselling.

If anyone else is concerned that they or their loved ones may be a victim – or has any further information – they should search online for the Major Incident Police Portal and select “Kent Police” and “Operation Sandpiper”. I know how distressing the details of these offences will be for many people.

The local NHS Trust has put arrangements in place to support staff who've been affected.

And regardless of whether someone has been directly impacted by these offences or not they can access the resources on the My Support Space website.

Mr Speaker, this is a profoundly upsetting case, that has involved distressing offences within our health service. The victims are not just those family members and friends who have been abused in this most horrific of ways – they are also those left behind.

People who've already experienced such loss and now experience unimaginable pain and anger.

They are victims too.

Even as we look into exactly what has happened as the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, I want to apologise to the friends and families of all the victims for the crimes perpetrated in the care of the NHS and for the hurt and suffering they are feeling.

Mr Speaker, I know that no apology can undo the pain and suffering caused by these offences.

But with such serious issues of dignity and security, we have a duty to look at what happened – in detail – and make sure it never happens again.

So I would like to update the House on the steps we're taking.

First, NHS England has written to all NHS Trusts asking for mortuary access

and post-mortem activities to be reviewed against current guidance from the Human Tissue Authority.

Trusts have also been asked to review their ways of working, and take a number of extra steps, including making sure that they have effective CCTV coverage is in place, that entry and access points are controlled with swipe access, and that appropriate DBS checks and risk assessments are being carried out.

NHS England will report directly to me with assurances that these measures have been taken.

So that we can be confident that the highest standards are being followed and that we're maintaining security, and upholding the dignity of the deceased.

Next, the local Trust has been putting its own steps in place.

They've already conducted a peer review of mortuary practice and the Trust initiated an independent investigation into these specific offences.

I would like to thank the Trust for its leadership for its quick initial work to set up the investigation.

But Mr Speaker, given the scale and nature of these sexual offences, I believe we must go further.

Today, I can announce I am replacing the Trust Investigation with an Independent Inquiry.

The Inquiry will look into the circumstances surrounding the offences committed at the hospital, and their national implications.

It will help us understand how these offences took place without detection in the Trust, identify any areas where early action by this Trust was necessary and then consider wider national issues – including for the NHS. I have appointed Sir Jonathan Michael to Chair this inquiry.

Sir Jonathan is an experienced NHS Chief Executive.

He is a Fellow of the Royal College of Physicians and former Chief Executive of three NHS hospital trusts. He had been leading the Trust investigation and will be able to build on some of the work he's already done. The Inquiry will be independent – and it will report to me as Secretary of State.

I've asked Sir Jonathan to split his Inquiry into two parts.

The first: an interim report, which I've asked for early in the new year.

The second, a final report, looking at the broader national picture and the wider lessons for the NHS and for other settings.

We will publish the terms of reference in due course and I have also asked Sir Jonathan to discuss with families and other parties to input into that

process.

Sir Jonathan's findings will be public and they will be published.

Mr Speaker, we have a responsibility to everyone affected by these shocking crimes.

To do right by those we've lost and those still left behind in their shock and grief.

Nothing that we can say in this place will undo the damage that has been done but we must act to make sure that nothing like this can ever happen again.

I commend this statement to the House.