



based on <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cn4892wnv2zo>

By Nick Trigg, Health correspondent

More Patients Turning to Private Healthcare to Avoid NHS Delays, Watchdog Warns

A growing number of people are choosing private healthcare to avoid long NHS waiting times, according to a patient watchdog, raising concerns that a two-tier health system is developing.

Healthwatch England reported that feedback from patients, alongside survey data, indicates an increasing reliance on private providers. Many patients said they were seeking private tests or treatments because NHS waiting lists were too long.

Private healthcare organisations have also noticed the trend. Some patients are paying privately for diagnostic tests or scans and then returning to the NHS with their results, hoping this will help them access treatment more quickly.

The government acknowledged that delays have pushed some patients to seek private care but said efforts are being made to improve services and shorten waiting times.

A survey of nearly 2,600 people in England found that 16% had used private healthcare within the past year, compared with just 9% two years earlier. Among those who paid for treatment, about 40% said they did so because NHS waiting times were too long. Income appears to influence who can access private care. The survey showed that 35% of people earning over £80,000 had used

private healthcare in the past year, while only 10% of those earning under £20,000 had done the same.

One Patient’s Experience

Chloe Leckie from Buckinghamshire turned to private healthcare after years of struggling with endometriosis.

Despite several NHS appointments, she said she was only offered physiotherapy and medication when she requested a hysterectomy.

The 51-year-old eventually chose private treatment after a change to her husband’s workplace health insurance meant the £20,000 procedure became affordable.

Last year she had surgery privately to remove both her womb and her appendix and now continues to pay for physiotherapy. She said she had been in severe pain but felt the NHS could not provide the help she needed. While grateful she could access private care, she acknowledged that many people do not have that option.

Waiting Times Still a Major Issue

Healthwatch England analysed around 390,000 pieces of public feedback collected over the past three years and concluded that further action is needed to reduce NHS waiting times.

The organisation said patients should also receive clearer information while waiting for treatment, including updates on when they might be seen and advice on managing symptoms.

Currently, nearly 40% of patients wait longer than the NHS target of 18 weeks for

hospital treatment.

Data from the Private Healthcare Information Network shows that close to 950,000 procedures and treatments were carried out privately in the UK last year.

In addition, many people are paying for private diagnostic scans and tests before returning to the NHS for treatment. While the NHS aims to complete such tests within six weeks, private providers can often arrange them within 48 hours. It is estimated that more than one million people take this route each year.

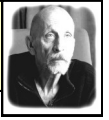
The watchdog also noted increasing numbers of patients seeking private mental health care and paying for weight-loss medication. David Hare, chief executive of the Independent Healthcare Providers Network, said private GP appointments were also becoming more common. He suggested that combining private and NHS care is increasingly becoming the “new normal”.

He added that people are often willing to pay for treatment because protecting their own health and that of their families is a top priority.

Pressure on NHS Services

Dr Katie Bramall, chair of the British Medical Association’s GP committee, said many doctors have noticed more patients receiving private treatment and then returning to NHS GPs for follow-up care.

She said this adds to the workload for GPs, who must review private test results to determine whether patients qualify for NHS treatment. In her view, this contributes to the

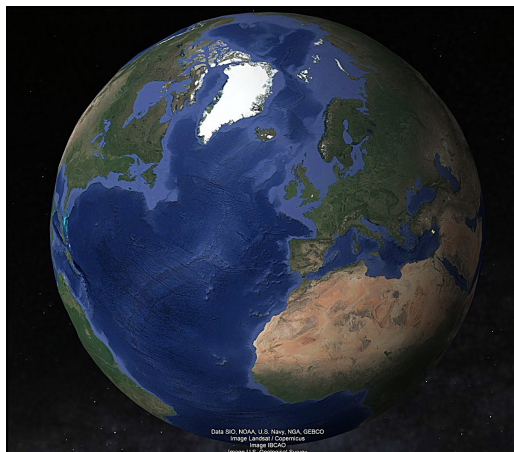


emergence of a two-tier healthcare system. Dr Bramall called for urgent national action to reduce waiting lists and ensure patients can receive high-quality care quickly, regardless of whether treatment is delivered by the NHS or the private sector. A spokesperson for the Department of Health and Social Care said progress is being made. Waiting lists are reportedly at their lowest level in almost three years, and improvements in waiting times are underway. The spokesperson added that the government is committed to ending the two-tier system that leaves some patients feeling forced to pay privately, while recognising that more work is still needed.

based on <https://www.msn.com/en-gb/money/technology/google-maps-is-set-for-a-huge-overhaul/ar-AA1Ytbil>
The Independent, by Michael Liedtke

Google Maps Preparing Major Update With New AI Features

Google Maps is about to undergo a major transformation as the company increases its use of artificial intelligence to assist its two billion users around the world. The redesign, announced on Thursday, will introduce new tools powered by Google's Gemini AI technology.



One of the main additions is a feature called "Ask Maps." This tool builds on the conversational capabilities that were first introduced last November. It will allow users to ask questions and receive tailored suggestions, such as where to find nearby charging points for devices, cafés with shorter waiting times, or help planning complex road trips with multiple stops.

The suggestions provided by Gemini will rely on Google Maps' enormous database. Since the platform launched more than 20 years ago, it has collected information on over 300 million locations along with reviews and contributions from more than 500 million users. When asked whether businesses might be able to pay for greater visibility in Ask Maps results, Google representatives did not confirm if advertising will be included.

At first, Ask Maps will be available through the Google Maps mobile app for iPhone and Android users in the United States and India. The feature is expected to expand to desktop computers and additional countries

later.

Another major change involves driving directions. Google has introduced a new feature called Immersive Navigation, which uses Gemini AI to create a three-dimensional view of the surrounding environment. This is designed to help users better understand their location while travelling.

The system will generate detailed 3D visuals that include nearby landmarks, distinctive buildings, road dividers and other features drivers can see around them. These visual cues aim to make it easier for people to recognise where they are and follow their route more confidently.

Google says safeguards built into Gemini should prevent the AI from producing incorrect or imaginary locations — a problem in AI systems often referred to as a "hallucination."

Immersive Navigation is also intended to provide clearer comparisons between different routes, highlighting their advantages and disadvantages. In addition, it can suggest suitable parking options when users arrive at their destination. Initially, this navigation upgrade will only be available in the United States through the Google Maps mobile app on Android and iPhone devices, as well as in vehicles that support compatible systems.

Google's decision to integrate more AI into Maps follows similar changes made to other major products, including Gmail and the Chrome browser, where Gemini tools have been added to make the services more responsive and helpful.

The move reflects Google's growing confidence in its Gemini 3 model, released late last year. It also comes as competition in artificial intelligence intensifies, with companies such as OpenAI and Anthropic developing their own advanced AI systems.

based on <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/health/mentingitis-outbreak-kent-university-live-updates-canterbury-vaccine-symptoms-b2939273.html>

by Tara Cobham, Dan Haygarth & Rebecca Whittaker and <https://healthjade.net/bacterial-meningitis/#What-is-bacterial-meningitis>

Kent meningitis outbreak: school honours "genuinely caring" sixth-form student who died

A school in Kent has paid tribute to a sixth-form pupil who died during a meningitis outbreak in the Canterbury area.

Amelia McIlroy, headteacher of Queen Elizabeth's Grammar School in Faversham, confirmed the student was a Year 13 pupil named Juliette. She described the teenager as someone who "embraced everything the school had to offer" and remembered her as a genuinely caring member of the school community.

The student died on Saturday, shortly

after the death of a University of Kent student linked to the same outbreak. The UK Health Security Agency (UKHSA) said it had been alerted to 13 suspected meningitis cases showing symptoms between Friday and Sunday in Canterbury. Some university students have been admitted to hospital, while others have been given precautionary antibiotics. Long queues were seen at a university building on Monday as students waited to receive the medication.

Officials are also attempting to trace possible contacts. Local nightclub Club Chemistry said authorities had asked for help identifying people who may have been exposed.

The specific strain responsible for the outbreak has not yet been confirmed. Meningococcal bacteria can cause meningitis—an inflammation of the membranes surrounding the brain and spinal cord—as well as blood poisoning, which can quickly lead to sepsis.

About bacterial meningitis

Bacterial meningitis is a serious infection affecting the protective membranes around the brain and spinal cord. It is considered a medical emergency because the illness can progress rapidly and may become fatal within hours if untreated.

Although relatively rare, it can affect anyone and is most common in babies, young children, teenagers and young adults. Prompt diagnosis and treatment significantly improve outcomes, and many people recover fully. However, in some cases the infection can cause long-term complications or death.

Possible long-term effects include:

- partial or complete hearing or vision loss
- memory and concentration difficulties
- seizures (epilepsy)
- problems with coordination, movement or balance
- limb loss due to severe infection and tissue damage

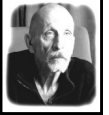
Overall, around 1 in 10 bacterial meningitis cases can be fatal.

Causes of bacterial meningitis

Several types of bacteria can cause meningitis. Common causes include:

- Streptococcus pneumoniae
- Neisseria meningitidis
- Haemophilus influenzae
- Group B Streptococcus





Listeria monocytogenes

These bacteria often begin as infections in the respiratory tract before entering the bloodstream and reaching the brain. In some cases they can directly invade the meninges. Certain strains are associated with particular risk groups. For example, meningococcal meningitis spreads easily in close-living environments such as student accommodation or military barracks, while listeria infections more commonly affect pregnant women, newborns, older adults and people with weakened immune systems. Some of these bacteria can also trigger sepsis, a life-threatening immune response to infection that can lead to organ failure.

Prevention and treatment

Early medical treatment with antibiotics is critical to reduce the risk of severe complications. Vaccinations are available for several major types of meningitis-causing bacteria and are an important tool in preventing outbreaks.

based on <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cp9mqpzn901o>

Nick Edser, Business reporter

Government announces £53m support package for households facing rising heating oil costs

Households struggling with soaring heating oil prices will receive help through a £53 million government support package, the prime minister has announced.

Sir Keir Starmer said the assistance would be aimed at low-income and vulnerable households, particularly in rural areas where heating oil is commonly used. Local authorities will be responsible for deciding who is eligible and how the funding is distributed.

Unlike gas and electricity, heating oil prices are not regulated by the energy watchdog Ofgem, meaning there is no cap on what suppliers can charge. As global oil prices have risen following the outbreak of conflict between the US-Israel alliance and Iran, households that rely on oil heating have been among the first to see their bills surge. Some customers report their costs have doubled.

The issue is especially significant in Northern Ireland, where around 500,000 homes — nearly two-thirds of households — depend on heating oil. Elsewhere in the UK, the 2021 census showed oil was the only central heating source for about 3% of homes in England and Wales and roughly 5% in Scotland.

In England, the funding will be delivered through local councils under the new Crisis and Resilience Fund, which launches on 1 April and replaces the temporary Household Support Fund. Priority will be given to households at immediate risk of losing access to heating or hot water. Councils will receive funding based on the number of homes in their area that use heating oil and will decide how best to allocate the support.

People who need help before the new scheme begins in April can still contact their local council, although any assistance would have to come from existing local funding.

In Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, the



money will go directly to devolved administrations with the expectation it will be used to assist vulnerable households. The allocation includes £27m for England, £17m for Northern Ireland, £4.6m for Scotland and £3.8m for Wales.

The government also said it is urgently considering new consumer protections for heating oil customers, since the sector currently falls outside Ofgem's regulatory powers.

Announcing the package, the prime minister said the UK's competition regulator had received reports of cancelled orders and price increases. He warned that companies could face legal action if they are found to have broken the law.

Sir Keir added that resolving the conflict in the Middle East would ultimately be the fastest way to bring down energy costs.

Fuel poverty campaigners welcomed the announcement but said further details were needed. Simon Francis, coordinator of the End Fuel Poverty Coalition, said it remained unclear exactly how the scheme would operate and who would qualify. He said the prospect of tighter regulation was encouraging but appeared to be more of a commitment in principle than a firm policy.

Opposition politicians also responded to the announcement. Shadow energy secretary Claire Coutinho said the support was helpful but argued the government should reduce electricity bills by 20% through the Conservatives' proposed Cheap Power Plan. Liberal Democrat leader Sir Ed Davey called instead for a three-month VAT break on heating oil and a formal price cap, saying households using oil heating deserve the same protections as those connected to the gas and electricity

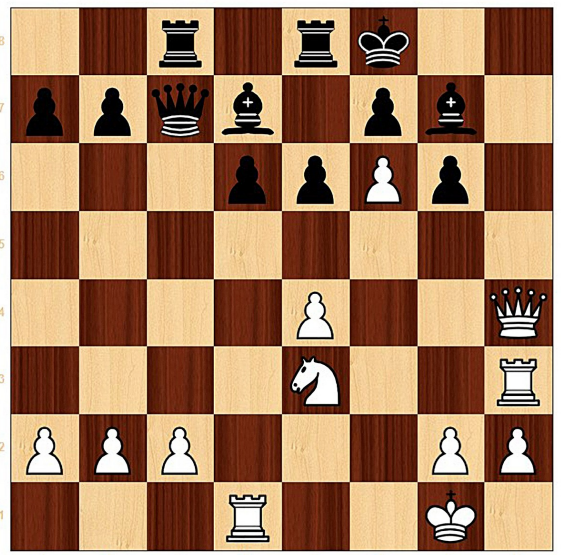
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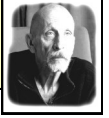
Global oil prices surged recently, briefly approaching \$120 a barrel before easing to around \$102 — still significantly higher than before the conflict began. Much of the increase has been linked to disruption in the Strait of Hormuz, a crucial shipping route that carries roughly one-fifth of the world's oil supply.

For households using gas and electricity in England, Wales and Scotland, bills are currently limited by Ofgem's energy price cap, which is expected to fall slightly in April. However, wholesale market trends over the coming months will determine prices from July onwards. If energy costs remain elevated, millions of households could face higher bills later this year.

The government previously intervened with the Energy Price Guarantee during the surge in energy costs following the pandemic and Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

#60 - White mates in 2





Energy Secretary Ed Miliband said the government would step in again if necessary, although any intervention would depend on how severely the conflict affects energy prices.

based on based on <https://www.nowtolove.com.au/royals/palace-compromised-andrew-lownie-interview/>
Royal biographer Andrew Lownie claims the monarchy faces a credibility crisis

Royal author Andrew Lownie says the monarchy's reputation has been seriously damaged and believes the situation raises difficult questions about the future of King Charles.

Lownie, whose best-selling book *Entitled: The Rise and Fall of the House of York* examined the life and controversies surrounding Prince Andrew, spoke to *Woman's Day* about what he describes as one of the most troubling aspects of the ongoing saga.

His comments come as renewed attention has focused on material connected to Jeffrey Epstein, including images that reportedly show Prince Andrew at Epstein's New York residence with a young woman sitting on his lap. Andrew has repeatedly denied any wrongdoing, and being referenced in Epstein-related documents does not in itself prove



Andrew Lownie

misconduct.

Reflecting on the latest developments, Lownie said he was struck by what he viewed as the "boldness" of Andrew's behaviour in photographs from that period.

"He appears to be posing confidently with young women around him," Lownie said, suggesting Andrew must have been aware that the images might eventually surface.

According to the biographer, the royal household played a role in containing the fallout from complaints and allegations. Lownie alleges that the Palace discouraged scrutiny and issued legal warnings while overlooking concerns raised by senior officials, including figures formerly linked to the Foreign Office and the intelligence services.

"They maintained that they would cooperate with investigators," he said, "yet letters were still being sent reminding security staff about strict confidentiality obligations."

Lownie argues that the most disturbing issue is the suggestion that the institution may have attempted to suppress damaging information.

"The idea that the Palace might have been involved in obstructing the truth is potentially a huge story," he said.

Because of this, Lownie believes the controversy has broader implications for the monarchy and its leadership.

"In my view the King should consider stepping aside," he said, adding that he believes the situation has compromised the institution's credibility. However, he also doubts that Charles would willingly abdicate.

"He spent decades waiting to become monarch and is unlikely to walk away easily," Lownie said. "My understanding is that he sees his role as absorbing the criticism and implementing reforms before Prince William eventually takes over with a fresh start. Whether Charles truly intends to push through those changes is another question."

While researching his book, Lownie said he contacted roughly 3,000 potential sources but only a small fraction were willing to speak.

"Even now, many people are reluctant to talk," he said. "There's still a strong sense of deference around the monarchy. Some people worry about the consequences — whether that's losing social invitations or honours."

He added that what surprised him most was how many individuals were aware of concerns surrounding Andrew but did not act on them.

"A number of people knew what was happening," Lownie said. "Those who tried to raise issues often found themselves sidelined."

Despite the reluctance of many sources, Lownie believes further information may eventually emerge.

"I've gathered a great deal of additional material for the paperback edition of the

book," he said. "I expect more people will feel able to come forward."

He also said that if investigators pursue the matter fully, further legal action could follow. Among those he believes could face questions is Sarah Ferguson, whom he said should cooperate with inquiries both in the UK & USA.

BASED ON <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2026/mar/14/trump-warships-strait-of-hormuz-iran-oil-shipping> and <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/world-news/2026/03/14/iran-war-latest-news-trump-strait-of-hormuz-kharg-island/>

Trump urges UK and allies to send warships to protect Strait of Hormuz

US President Donald Trump has called on the UK and other allies to deploy warships to help keep the Strait of Hormuz open as tensions with Iran threaten one of the world's most critical oil routes.

Posting on his Truth Social platform, Trump urged a multinational naval presence in the region to protect shipping through the strategic waterway linking the Persian Gulf with the Gulf of Oman. Around a fifth of the world's oil supply passes through the narrow strait, with roughly 20 million barrels transported through it each day.

The appeal comes after a surge in attacks on vessels travelling through the area since the United States and Israel launched strikes on Iran two weeks ago. Several ships have been targeted with projectiles, mines or explosive boats, effectively disrupting traffic through the passage and pushing global oil prices sharply higher.

Trump said multiple countries affected by the disruption should contribute naval forces alongside the United States.

"Many countries, especially those impacted by Iran's attempted closure of the Hormuz Strait, will be sending warships with the United States to keep the route open and safe," he wrote.

He claimed Iran's military capability had already been destroyed but warned that the country could still threaten shipping with smaller attacks such as drones, mines or short-range missiles.

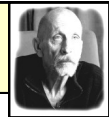
Trump specifically mentioned China, France, Japan, South Korea and the UK as nations that should help secure the waterway, adding that the US would continue military operations along the Iranian coastline and against vessels it considers hostile until the route is safe again.

Iran rejected the president's claims, saying suggestions that its military had been wiped out were based on "fabricated lies".

Tehran has also denied fully shutting the passage. Iranian foreign minister Abbas Araghchi said the strait remained open to most international shipping, but was closed to American and Israeli vessels and tankers.

The UK government said it was still discussing options with allies. A Ministry of Defence spokesperson said officials were working with international partners to consider ways of protecting shipping in the region.

French president Emmanuel Macron has



indicated France could send naval vessels to the Gulf, but only for escort duties once the most intense phase of the conflict has passed. Trump's latest request for international support contrasts with comments he made last week criticising the UK for considering military involvement too late. At the time he accused Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer of trying to join the conflict after the United States had already achieved victory.

Britain did not participate in the initial US-Israeli strikes on Iran that killed the country's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. Starmer has defended that decision, saying it was necessary to act in Britain's national interest.

Speaking to MPs earlier this week, the prime minister acknowledged that Trump disagreed with the UK's stance but said it was his responsibility to decide whether direct military involvement was appropriate.

Meanwhile, Iran's new supreme leader, Mojtaba Khamenei, has suggested the country may continue using the threat of blocking the Strait of Hormuz as leverage against the US and Israel.

With attacks on shipping continuing and oil prices climbing, analysts warn that prolonged disruption to the route could have major consequences for the global economy.



based on <https://metro.co.uk/2026/03/15/irans-new-supreme-leader-secretly-flown-russia-life-saving-surgery-putin-palace-27455740/> by Barney Davis

Reports claim Iran's new supreme leader was injured in airstrike and secretly flown to Russia

Iran's newly appointed supreme leader, Mojtaba Khamenei, was reportedly seriously injured in a US airstrike and later flown to Russia for emergency medical treatment, according to unverified media reports.

Kuwaiti newspaper Al-Jarida claims Khamenei was pulled from a bunker following the strike that killed several members of his family, including his father, the former supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. The report alleges he was quietly

evacuated from Iran and transported to Moscow aboard a Russian military aircraft.

According to the outlet, the injured cleric was taken to one of Vladimir Putin's presidential residences where he underwent a secret operation that was said to have been successful.

Details of Khamenei's injuries remain unclear and vary widely. Some reports suggest he suffered relatively minor wounds such as a fractured foot and facial cuts, while others claim he lost a leg or was placed in a coma following the attack.

The claims have not been independently verified. Al-Jarida said the information came from what it described as a "senior source close to the new Iranian supreme leader."

The speculation emerged after early US reports suggested Khamenei may have been killed during the strike. However, Iranian officials insist he survived.

Iran's foreign minister, Abbas Araghchi, said the country's leadership remains intact. "The leader of the revolution is in good health and is fully managing the situation," he wrote.

Mojtaba Khamenei was chosen to succeed his father after US and Israeli strikes targeted Iran's leadership at the start of the conflict.

Despite being named supreme leader, he has yet to appear publicly. Instead, his first message since taking the role was released in written form by Iranian state media.

In the statement, he vowed retaliation for the attacks, declaring that Iran would not hesitate to avenge those killed in the conflict.

"I assure everyone that we will not refrain from avenging the blood of your martyrs," the message said.

based on <https://uk.news.yahoo.com/>

[london-aquarium-says-no-change-132906028.html](https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2026/mar/15/london-aquarium-says-no-change-132906028.html)

by Rebecca Speare-Cole

London aquarium says changes are needed for indoor penguin enclosure

The company behind Sea Life London Aquarium has acknowledged that the current situation for its gentoo penguins must change following growing criticism over the birds' living conditions.

Merlin Entertainments, which runs the central London attraction, said it is developing a clear plan for the future of the penguin colony and intends to publish it by the end of May.

They added that maintaining the status quo was not being considered and that experts were exploring possible alternatives, including relocating the penguins to another facility or further improving their existing enclosure at Sea Life London.

The company said the final proposal will take into account advice from scientists, campaign groups and other stakeholders before being released later this spring.

Animal welfare groups argue that the penguins have now spent more than a decade living in a basement-style environment where the pool is reportedly only around six to seven feet deep.

The issue has attracted national attention through the "Free the 15" campaign, supported by the Daily Express alongside organisations such as the Born Free Foundation and Freedom for Animals. Environmental campaigner and former musician Feargal Sharkey and wildlife presenter Chris Packham have also voiced support.

Political pressure has also grown. In November, more than 70 MPs signed a letter to Environment Secretary Emma Reynolds urging a review of the penguins' welfare, while an online petition calling for the birds to be moved to a more suitable facility has gathered nearly 50,000 signatures.

