UK Winter Set to Increase Risk of Hypothermia by Shaz Memon

Article published on March 13th 2012 | Business

The British winter is set to bring freezing temperatures again. Weâ€™ve escaped until now but the first signs of cold are starting to manifest themselves. While the Winter Fuel Allowance goes some way towards funding heating costs for older citizens, spiralling energy bills can still leave some of Britainâ€™s most vulnerable families without proper heating at the time they need it most of all. So how can charity help stop the risk of elderly dying, cold weather related deaths and health risks caused by lack of heating?

Information is key. If the Winter Fuel Allowance is not enough to help the elderly combat the cold weather in the British winter, then charity help must first take the form of informing the elderly on how to take practical steps to avoid the symptoms of hypothermia.

Hypothermia occurs when the body temperature drops approximately two degrees (Centigrade) below its normal core heat of 37 degrees. For older people it is extremely dangerous and can become life threatening much more quickly than in a younger person.

Help the Aged is particularly concerned about the effects of a shortfall in Winter Fuel Allowance on the elderly. Advice to try and prevent the elderly dying cold weather related deaths includes keeping the main temperature of the house to a steady 21 degrees Centigrade and wearing several thin layers of clothing rather than just one or two thick ones. The layering approach traps body heat between fabrics, which has a much better insulating effect.

The cold weather brought to us by the British Winter has health ramifications beyond hypothermia, too. Slips, trips and falls in icy weather can cause severe health problems for the elderly; and older citizens with pre existing conditions or winter illnesses run the risk of incurring permanent damage or contracting serious secondary infections if they are not keeping warm enough.

Charity help (such as the help delivered by charities like Help the Aged every year) provides some assistance beyond the Winter Fuel Allowance. Age UK, for example, runs an annual Donate a Coat scheme to get warmer clothing to the people who need it most. At the end of the day, though, no amount of coats is likely to turn the tide of older people needlessly dying in the British Winter freeze.

What we need is information and profile raising. Petitions for local MPs, fundraising events and ultimately pressure on Parliament to debate raising the Winter Fuel Allowance so it covers more of the heating bill. Without this kind of pressure, incidents of the elderly dying cold weather related deaths will continue to rise.

Knowing the signs of hypothermia will at least help the elderly and their carers, friends, relatives and loved ones to spot the signs before it is too late. Violent shivering, chattering teeth, purple lips and slurred speech are all warnings that hospital attention is needed urgently.

Article Source:
http://www.articleside.com/business-articles/uk-winter-set-to-increase-risk-of-hypothermia.htm - Article Side

Shaz Memon - About Author:
Philip Evans Jnr is a Funeral Director based in Brighton & Hove (Sussex Funeral Directors). His

current concern is in raising public awareness of the effects of a cold weather on the elderly.

Article Keywords:
Winter Fuel Allowance, Charity help, Cold weather, British Winter, elderly dying cold weather, help the aged

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