

Lives of elderly cancer patients are written off, claims charity

By Laura Donnelly, Health Correspondent

MORE than 14,000 lives a year could be saved if elderly cancer patients were not "written off" as being too old for treatment, a leading charity said yesterday.

Macmillan Cancer Support said older patients were falling victim to "age discrimination" and were too often denied treatment on the grounds of their age, without proper assessment of their fitness levels and the likelihood they could benefit from treatment.

Ciaran Devane, the charity's chief executive, said: "The barriers to getting treatment – which include age discrimination and inadequate assessment methods – must be tackled now so more older people can survive cancer and live for many years."

The charity said that if mortality rates from cancer in this country matched those in the US, 14,000 lives a year could be saved among those aged 75 and older. "It's wrong to write off older people as too old for treatment," Mr Devane said.

Research from the charity and the National Cancer Intelligence Network found that tens of thousands of pensioners who have been diagnosed with cancer have survived for at least a decade.

More than 130,000 people in the UK have survived for at least 10 years after being diagnosed with cancer at 65 or above, the charity said. This includes more than 8,000 patients who were diag-

nosed at the age of 80 and older. But the charity said that the figures would be far higher if many patients in the UK were not being denied treatment because they are deemed to be too old.

Survival rates for almost all common cancers are worse in Britain than the European average, international research has found. In December, a study of more than 29 countries found that only for skin cancer was survival in this country better than the EU average.

The charity said doctors needed to make better assessments of patients' physical health and wellbeing, instead of making decisions about treatment on the basis of age alone. Mr Devane said: "With a proper assessment and appropriate treatment, our research shows that many older cancer patients can live for a long time and can even be cured."

"While it's good news that so many ... are benefiting from treatment, many thousands more could live longer if our survival rates for over-65s matched those in comparable countries."

Dr Mick Peake, the cancer network's clinical lead, added: "It is vital that all patients receive the best and most effective treatment based on the nature of their cancer and their fitness for treatment. We know that cancer survival rates in older patients in many other countries are better in the UK and ensuring optimal treatment at all ages is the way of tackling this issue."