

Poor care kills 1,000 hospital patients a month

New NHS study highlights concern over deaths from avoidable kidney failure

By **Padraic Flanagan** and **Laura Donnelly**, Health Editor

AT LEAST 1,000 patients are dying needlessly each month from kidney failure linked to dehydration and poor care, according to an NHS study.

The deaths could be prevented by simple steps such as nurses ensuring patients have enough to drink and doctors reviewing their medication, the researchers say.

Between 12,000 and 40,000 hospital patients die annually because staff do not diagnose the treatable condition, called acute kidney injury (AKI), a figure that dwarfs the death toll from hospital superbugs such as MRSA.

The report adds to the weight of evidence that doctors and nurses are failing to combat the illness, often called "the silent killer".

Last year NHS watchdog Nice was forced to issue guidelines on giving patients water after its own study found that tens of thousands of deaths a year from kidney failure could be avoided if staff ensured patients were hydrated.

It highlighted how old and vulnerable patients were being left on wards without fluids, quickly becoming too weak from dehydration to request a drink from nurses.

The latest research found the condition was five times more prevalent in English hospitals than previously thought.

The condition causes a loss of kidney function and can develop very quickly. It can occur in people already suffering illnesses such as heart failure or diabetes, and those admitted to hospital with infections.

It can also develop after major surgery, including heart surgery, because the kidneys can be deprived of normal blood flow during the procedures. Severe dehydration is one of the main causes of the condition.

"Many of the failings identified in the report related to basic medical care, such as checking of electrolytes, performance of physiological observations and adequate senior review," the researchers found.

The condition is responsible for nearly eight times as many deaths as

the superbug MRSA at its peak, according to the study commissioned by NHS Improving Quality, a standards body.

The study, carried out by kidney disease experts and Insight Health Economics, found the condition may affect as many as one in seven hospital patients and costs the NHS £1 billion a year.

Report co-author Prof Donal O'Donoghue, a consultant renal physician at Salford Royal NHS Foundation Trust, said: "We know that at least a thousand people a month are dying in hospital from acute kidney injury due to poor care.

"These deaths are avoidable. This is completely unacceptable and we can't allow it to continue.

"Doctors and nurses need to make elementary checks to prevent AKI. In general, people who are having surgery shouldn't be asked to go without water for longer than two hours.

"Sometimes that is unavoidable but then medical staff need to check their patients are not becoming dehydrated. They also need to be aware that some common medications increase the risk of AKI."

Joyce Robins from campaign group Patient Concern, said: "These figures are really alarming. Too often we are hearing of cases where patients, especially the elderly, are not being properly hydrated - about cases where patients are left begging for water and being told to wait."

Charlotte Leslie MP, a Conservative member of the Commons health select committee said the report "highlights a lack of fundamental care in some of our hospitals and suggests that in some places basic standards are not being met".

She added: "We saw in Mid-Staffs that the unthinkable can happen. We have to look again at nursing training, at continuity of medical care and that the management focus is on having sufficient front line staff to look after patients."

A spokesman for NHS England said: "We have taken steps to ensure the NHS puts in place coherent long-term plans to reduce avoidable deaths in our hospitals, and to improve the way data is used in decision making."

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