

Most terminally ill patients are not told they are dying

By Rebecca Smith, Medical Editor

SICK and elderly hospital patients are not being told they are dying, a review has found.

Fewer than half of people known to be in their final days were informed of the fact by medical staff, the "deeply disturbing" report found.

Care for the dying "is not an important issue" for hospitals and has failed to improve on many wards despite sustained pressure from campaigners, the Royal College of Physicians warned.

Ann Clwyd, the Labour MP, raised the problem in the Commons when she said her husband, Owen Roberts, 77, died "like a battery chicken" from an "almost callous lack of care".

A comprehensive national audit has now found that fewer than half of patients

judged as capable of having a conversation were told that they were dying by medical staff. Fewer than one in five patients had a discussion with staff about whether they should have a drip to give them fluids or nutrients.

Experts said there was no excuse for the failings.

Claire Henry, the chief executive of the National Council for Palliative Care and the Dying Matters Coalition, said: "The way we care for dying people says something fundamental about our values as a society, as well as being an acid test for how well the NHS is working, which is why so many of these findings are so deeply disturbing."

Care of the dying in hospitals has been of national concern since campaigners warned that patients were being placed

Continued on Page 4

Daily Telegraph 15 May 2014

NHS hospitals failing to take care of the dying

Continued from Page 1

on the controversial Liverpool Care Pathway without their knowledge and in some cases when they were not dying. It is now being phased out in favour of individual care plans but the overall state of care of dying patients remains poor, the audit by the Royal College of Physicians found.

One in four bereaved families felt they were not involved in decisions about their loved one's care and a similar proportion said they did not feel supported during their last two days.

Training in end-of-life care was mandatory for doctors in only one in five hospital trusts and for nurses in 28 per cent of trusts, despite being part of national guidance. National recommendations on staff training and availability of specialists seven days a week have not been implemented, it was found.

The College audited data from 131 hospital trusts and looked in detail at a sample of 6,580 patients medical notes. The patients had a mean age of 82, and almost one in four had cancer. Almost half were on the Liverpool Care Pathway or similar protocol. In addition 27 per cent of hospital trusts surveyed bereaved families and 858 responses were analysed. Only one fifth of patients were asked about their

spiritual needs at the end of their life. Between 60 per cent and 80 per cent of patients had the recommended standing prescription for pain relief and other medication at the end of their life, down from 90 per cent in the 2011 audit.

Fewer than one in three patients were on a drip to give them fluids at the end of their life and just seven per cent were receiving nutrients through a tube.

More than a third of families said the emotional support they received from medical staff was fair or poor.

Norman Lamb, the care minister, said: "This report shows evidence of very good care but I am seriously concerned about the variations in care, and improvements are needed in the way some clinicians communicate with patients and support families. I am determined this should improve."

● Frail elderly people are being exposed to neglect and abuse because caring and compassionate workers are being "forced out" of their jobs by low pay and poor conditions, a review warns today.

The care industry is in a "vicious downward spiral", staffed by "exhausted" and disillusioned workers, many of them determined to leave, the study by Baroness Kingsmill, the Labour peer, found.

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