

Scandal of dehydration in care homes

Rosemary Bennett

Social Affairs Correspondent

Kat Lay

Thousands of elderly care-home residents are admitted to hospital suffering from dehydration, according to research revealing widespread neglect.

One in eight patients admitted from residential care had high sodium levels from lack of fluids, the study by Oxford University and two leading hospitals showed. The figure was five times higher than for those who were hospitalised from their own homes.

One of the report's authors suggested that care-home staff deliberately overlooked the problem of dehydration to

cut down on incontinence, although other experts said that carelessness was to blame.

Levels of hydration are widely regarded as a proxy for the quality of care. Many elderly people, especially those with dementia, suffer from a blunted thirst mechanism so have to be persuaded to drink. They might also take a long time to sip a drink, requiring assistance and patience from staff.

Caroline Abrahams, of Age UK, said that the findings would be "deeply distressing" for families entrusting their relatives to care homes. "Deaths linked to dehydration are completely avoidable and unacceptable," she said. "We need to ensure that care-home staff are

trained to help [older people] drink enough and avoid increased health risks associated with dehydration, like confusion, low blood pressure and falls, which can lead to hospitalisation."

The study is the most extensive on dehydration among the elderly. Researchers examined records from 20,000 patients aged over 65 who were taken to Barnet and Chase Farm Hospitals NHS Trust between January 2011 and December 2013. Researchers from the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine and the Royal Free Hospital were also involved.

Carol Clay, whose 71-year-old mother, Norma Spear, died of

Continued on page 2, col 5

16th January 2015