

Hospital staff told to stop denying dying patients water

By Laura Donnelly
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DOCTORS and nurses have been ordered to give water to the dying under new NHS guidelines to stamp out the use of the Liverpool Care Pathway.

The National Institute of Health and Care Excellence (Nice) said those nearing the end of life must be given support to drink if they wish.

Ministers ordered an overhaul of end-of-life care, after repeated cases in which elderly patients were found to have had treatment and fluids stopped without their consent or knowledge.

Such practices, under the guise of the Liverpool Care Pathway, were supposed to be stopped last year. But earlier this year cancer charities said some hospitals were operating the same protocols under "a different name".

The Royal College of Nursing told the health select committee that nurses had "not seen a significant difference" in care of the dying since the pathway was officially withdrawn.

New draft guidance from Nice said people in their last days of life must be helped to drink if they wished to and were able.

Family members should be encouraged to help with giving drinks, and with aids such as sponges for those who were too weak to drink normally, it advises. Staff are also told to check for difficulties such as swallowing problems.

The new guidance, on hospital care for the dying, said those in their final days should also be offered assisted hydration (using an intravenous drip) if it would help them. The guidance for

doctors and nurses sets out the signs which indicate that a person is nearing death — and the sort of changes which could indicate a recovery or deterioration.

It follows concerns that hospital staff have missed crucial signs of improvement — which should have led to treatment being restarted, or nutrition or hydration given.

The guidance also states that decisions on when patients are reaching the end of their life should be taken by

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a number of health experts rather than relying on the opinion of just one doctor.

Sir Andrew Dillon, Nice's Chief Executive, said: "Recognising when we are close to death and helping us to remain comfortable is difficult for everyone involved. The Liverpool Care Pathway was originally devised to help doctors and nurses provide quality end-of-life care. While it helped many to pass away with dignity, it became clear over time that it wasn't always used in the way it was intended."

In May, the Health and Parliamentary Services Ombudsman said end-of-life care could be improved for more than 350,000 people a year in England. Its report found that too many NHS patients were dying without dignity because of failings by care staff.