

# Dementia drive created false alarms

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A dementia diagnosis drive by the government left thousands of elderly people distressed for no reason, according to an investigation.

The proportion of people without dementia who were referred by GPs to memory clinics rose by 152 per cent after the NHS introduced targets for diagnosis of the disease.

GPs said that the rise in “false alarms” put older people and their families through unnecessary anxiety. The average wait for them to receive an all-clear was 11 weeks.

The Prime Minister’s Challenge on Dementia 2020 was launched in 2012 and announced a drive to ensure that two thirds of an estimated 670,000

people living with dementia in England would be formally diagnosed. NHS bosses brought in targets to boost diagnoses from GPs, including controversial incentives such as a £55 payment for all new dementia detections last year.

The investigation by *Pulse*, the magazine for GPs, used the Freedom of Information Act to get figures from hospital memory clinics. It found that GP referrals into memory services at 11 trusts increased from just over 10,000 in 2011-12 to over 22,000 in 2014-15.

The number of dementia diagnoses rose by 87 per cent, but was accompanied by a 152 per cent rise in the proportion of referrals that did not have dementia. The figures also show that the average waiting time for a diagnosis

was 11 weeks, way above the government target of six weeks. Steve Iliffe, professor of primary care for older people at University College London, said that the figures were “alarming”.

He added: “If you worked in a cardiology clinic and two in every three people referred had nothing wrong with their heart you’d worry about the reasoning behind the referral.”

A Department of Health spokesman said: “We have made huge improvements in the diagnosis rate. From 42 per cent in 2010 to 67 per cent today, our diagnosis rates are now among the best in the world. The prime minister’s 2020 challenge will ensure that dementia care, awareness and research are transformed over the coming years, as we seek to defeat this disease.”

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