

One in 5 dying patients denied help with eating and drinking in hospital

NEARLY one in five dying hospital patients are being denied help eating and drinking in their final days, an official survey has revealed.

And some hospitals are still neglecting their most vulnerable patients, despite the abolition of the disgraced Liverpool Care Pathway system more than a year ago, the report suggests.

The Office for National Statistics carried

By **Steve Doughty** and **Simon Caldwell**

out the large-scale inquiry among families into the shortcomings of end-of-life care.

More than 18 per cent of patients in hospital were given no help to drink or take on fluids in their last two days of life.

An even higher proportion, 19 per cent, had no help from nurses or doctors to eat or

take nutrition. In well over one in ten cases, families of patients who died in hospital said their loved ones were denied adequate pain relief in their last two days.

And one in seven said hospital staff did little to help make dying relatives comfortable. The ONS 'Voices' survey of bereaved families was based on reports from more than 21,000 people whose relatives died last year.

Simon Chapman of the National Council for Palliative Care bizarrely described the results as 'encouraging'.

He added: 'It is essential we hear the voices of those who have lost someone and, through them, the experiences of people in their final days and hours. We cannot accept any situation in which any individuals receive less than good quality end of life care.'

But the findings were met with fury by medics, charities and pressure groups who demanded full-scale reform of the way the NHS treats people seen to be terminally ill.

Dr Fran Woodard from Macmillan Cancer Support said: 'These results cast an unforgiving eye on end-of-life care, and highlight how vital it is for immediate action to be taken to improve the experience of dying people. This survey shows really basic failings in how people with cancer are spending their final days.'

The questions on nutrition and hydration were introduced to the survey following the Liverpool Care Pathway scandal. The Path-

'Really basic failings'

way meant that if a doctor thought a patient was dying, they could sedate them, and deny them nutrition or fluids until they died.

The LCP was scrapped in 2014 after a Daily Mail campaign disclosed the disgrace of hospitals being bribed with millions of pounds to put patients on the scheme.

Professor Patrick Pullicino, consultant neurologist at East Kent University Hospitals, who was the first senior medic to sound the alarm over the LCP, said: 'Hydration should never be removed from someone who is potentially dying, both because dehydration may hasten or actually be the primary cause of death and also because dehydration is an agonizing way to die.'

'It is clear from the survey that patients are being dehydrated against the wishes of relatives.' Professor Pullicino also called for the compulsory reporting of any incident when a patient is left without fluids for more than 24 hours.

Yesterday's findings come less than a month after a Royal College of Physicians inquiry found that up to half of dying patients were not helped to drink in their final day and two thirds were not helped with nutrition.