

# Dying elderly given care that prolongs suffering

More than a third of elderly patients who are dying receive “invasive and potentially harmful” treatments in their last weeks of life, according to an extensive global review.

Analysis of data from 1.2 million patients worldwide, including from England, found patients being subjected to “excessive” and unnecessary treatments that make no difference to the course of their illness.

Researchers said that families were part of the problem, with some struggling to accept that nothing more could be done for their loved ones, and expecting “heroic” interventions from doctors.

The review, led by experts at the University of New South Wales in Australia, involved ten countries and looked at the experiences of bereaved families and doctors.

Published in the *International Journal for Quality in Health Care*, it found that around a third of elderly patients with advanced, irreversible conditions were

given treatments of no benefit to them. This included a third of cancer patients given chemotherapy in the last six weeks of life, 10 per cent of all patients admitted to intensive care, 33 per cent given antibiotics, cardiovascular, digestive or endocrine medicines, and 30 per cent given dialysis, radiotherapy, blood transfusions or other life support.

Dr Magnolia Cardona-Morrell, who led the research, said medical advances have led to “unrealistic” expectations about what doctors can achieve.

“It is not unusual for family members to refuse to accept the fact that their loved one is naturally dying of old age ... and so they pressure doctors to attempt heroic interventions,” she said. “Doctors are torn by the ethical dilemma of delivering what they were trained to do, save lives, versus respecting the patient’s right to die with dignity.”

She called for “honest and open” discussions with patients or their families as a way of avoiding treatments that would not help prolong life.

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