

Cancer patients needlessly left to suffer without pain relief

Chris Smyth Health Editor

Cancer patients are routinely left in needless pain as they approach the end of their lives, the first study of its kind has found.

Pain relief is not given to patients until they are close to death after months of suffering, researchers said.

Older people are least likely to get the medicine they need as doctors are scared off giving vital treatment by misplaced fears of an "opioid epidemic".

Patients were only given drugs such

as morphine nine weeks before they died after a year of suffering cancer without pain relief, the study found.

It looked at data on 6,000 patients who died of cancer over seven years, finding that less than half were prescribed strong pain relief by GPs, and then only soon before they died.

"For many patients pain is experienced at many stages throughout the illness," said Lucy Ziegler, of the University of Leeds, lead author of the study. "In fact pain is the most common presenting symptom at diagnosis.

Effective pain control is fundamental to good quality of life.

"For patients who are approaching the end of their lives it is crucially important we strive to get this right and that we help them achieve the best quality of life possible."

Older people were given less pain relief, and people who died in hospital were 60 per cent less likely to get timely drugs than those in hospices.

More than 160,000 people a year die of cancer in Britain and concerns about end-of-life care have intensified after a

scandal over dying patients being refused food and drink because of widespread abuse of a controversial checklist, which has now scrapped.

Mike Bennett, a co-author of the paper, which was published in the journal *Pain*, said that doctors may be worried about the overuse of opioids but their use in cancer patients had increased only 16 per cent in ten years, much slower than other prescriptions.

Jane Maher, joint chief medical officer at Macmillan Cancer Support, said: "Too often people in the last year of life

experience uncontrolled pain and this important study suggests it is a particular problem for older people, who may have more complex health problems. Pain needs to be taken into account at an earlier stage, often when they are still going through active treatment."

Bill Noble, medical director at Marie Curie, said: "We know that providing access to specialist palliative care earlier in a person's illness can support advance care planning and promote better pain management."

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