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GPs missing chance to catch thousands of cancer cases

By Henry Bodkin

THOUSANDS of people are being diagnosed with late-stage cancer in A&E due to GPs repeatedly misreading their symptoms, researchers have warned.

Of those who were diagnosed with the disease in an emergency setting, almost a quarter had visited their family doctor three or more times, figures that experts described as "extremely concerning".

Those affected included 31 per cent of breast cancer patients who had attended three or more appointments, and 41 per cent of those diagnosed with bowel cancer.

A significant group of patients given an emergency diagnosis - 29 per cent -

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were those who had not been to the GP. Specialists last night said this illustrated the worrying ignorance many people have of the so-called "red flag" symptoms that should give cause for concern.

But campaigners said the figures were partly explained by the difficulty many face securing an appointment.

Samia al Qadhi, the chief executive of Breast Cancer Care, said: "We speak to women and men who tell us how incredibly distressing it is not to be taken seriously when they've found a possible symptom."

She said almost a third of people with incurable secondary breast cancer felt clinicians had not taken their concerns about being unwell seriously before being diagnosed.

People who are diagnosed with cancer as an emergency have a worse

prognosis than those diagnosed at an earlier stage.

Cancer Research UK data shows that 22 per cent of people diagnosed with cancer each year are an emergency case, approximately 78,000 people.

However, the Royal College of General Practitioners (RCGP) has pointed out that rate of emergency diagnoses as a proportion of overall new cases of cancer had dropped five per cent in the past five years.

The new research, published in the *British Journal of General Practice*, analysed the medical records of 4,637 people diagnosed in A&E.

It showed that those patients who had not seen their GP before a diagnosis tended to be older, male and living in the most deprived parts of the country.

But the vast majority of all cancer patients diagnosed as an emergency - 71 per cent - had attended a GP appointment.

Judith Brodie, the acting chief executive of Beating Bowel Cancer, said: "A bowel cancer patient's chance of being successfully treated drops dramatically if they are not diagnosed until a late stage, so more must be done to ensure that the public is aware of the symptoms and how important it is to get them checked out as soon as possible."

The research acknowledged that among the patients diagnosed as an emergency were those with difficult-to-spot cancers, such as lung cancer or multiple myeloma, and younger patients.

A spokesman for the RCGP said: "GPs take their role in diagnosing cancer as early as possible very seriously and we would urge patients who experience any concerning or persistent symptoms to book an appointment with their GP."

The study was funded by Cancer Research UK and conducted by University College London, the Cambridge University and Public Health England.