

# Families asked to feed dementia patients

Chris Smyth Health Editor

Families must be drafted on to wards to feed relatives with dementia who are routinely going hungry in hospital, a comprehensive audit of NHS care concludes. One in four staff caring for dementia patients says they cannot feed them properly, with some resorting to sharing their own food, the study by leading doctors found.

Overstretched hospitals can struggle to provide meals when people need them and do not have the staff to ensure vulnerable patients actually eat what is put in front of them, the figures suggest.

Oliver Corrado, consultant geriatrician and author of the report, argued that if families helped out more, it would also be good for those without relatives. "In a 20-bed ward, there will be maybe two or three patients who

don't have carers, or carers that don't want to be involved or can't do it because they live too far away, and perhaps at mealtimes the staff could focus on them knowing the others are being well looked after," he said.

After questioning 15,000 staff on wards caring for dementia patients, 5,000 carers and examining the records of 10,000 patients, the audit recommends carers help out with food as long as this does not replace existing care.

"If people want to come in at mealtimes and help with feeding, that should be encouraged," said Dr Corrado. "In my experience, a lot of carers do want to participate in care and feel quite offended that visiting is not more flexible."

For the first time, the audit, carried out by the Royal College of Psychiatrists, asked staff whether the dementia patients they cared for were properly

nourished, with 24 per cent saying this did not happen all the time.

Dr Corrado said he was surprised by the scale of the problem, suggesting the figures "could also be telling us that food may be plated up but there's nobody around to feed those patients". He added: "I would want reassurance that food wasn't being plated up and left out of reach. I think that would be my biggest concern."

At least one healthcare assistant told the audit that they had "often given food and drink of my own to patients" because nothing was available overnight for patients who were used to eating late or hadn't had a meal.

Lesley Carter, of Age UK, said: "We should be really worried, and hospitals should be really worried, too. Often these people may be malnourished before they come into hospitals so it's

really important that they are eating regularly. People who are malnourished don't heal as quickly."

She said dementia patients were often reassured and ate better when a familiar face was near by. However, she warned that "we can't subcontract out feeding people", saying it would be "awful" if families felt they had no choice but to come in at mealtimes.

Ms Carter said the system worked well in hospitals where staff discussed with relatives what role they wanted to play and both showed flexibility.

Eileen Burns, of the British Geriatrics Society, said: "On the surface it might be perceived as simply a cost-saving exercise but in reality it is often highly beneficial for older patients with dementia. Relatives and carers can help create a supportive, familiar environment."