

Thousands wrongly told they will die under faulty NHS system

By Henry Bodkin

TENS of thousands of seriously ill patients are being prematurely warned they could be about to die because of a defective diagnostic method used across the NHS.

Experts have said families and loved ones are being put under needless stress after new research showed the

tool over-predicted the chances of death more often than not. The so-called "surprise question", encourages doctors to ask themselves, "Would you be surprised if this patient were to die in the next few months, weeks, days?"

A wide-scale analysis by University College London found that more than half of those predicted to die within a specific time lived longer than ex-

pected. It means that care for those patients is being moved to an end-of-life footing earlier than necessary.

The research also revealed that the unreliability of the question, which forms one of several diagnostic criteria, means other patients who really are about to die and need palliative care are not receiving it. The method is referenced in guidance published by the

National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (Nice), and is widely used by doctors across the NHS. Last night, however, Nice sought to distance itself from the decision-making tool.

Dr Bill Noble, medical director at Marie Curie, which funded the research, said: "The rigid application of survival estimates is not an accurate clinical tool and unfortunately it

worries more people than it needs to. For some families, even the idea that a relative is facing their last piece of life is anathema; it's something they cannot handle."

For patients with a terminal illness, palliative care shifts clinical focus towards quality of life, symptom management and mentally preparing a

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