Deaths from NHS blunders up 60%

Care 'is suffering as staff chase targets'

Botched: Errors during surgery accounted for nearly 400 deaths

By **Daniel Martin**
Health Reporter

THE number of patients killed by hospital blunders has soared by 60 per cent in just two years, the Daily Mail can reveal.

Official records show that 3,645 died as a result of outbreaks of infections, botched operations and other mistakes in 2007/08. That was up from 2,273 two years before.

Critics say quality of NHS care has suffered as doctors and nurses come under pressure to meet Government waiting time targets. The sharp rise is also down to the fact that more trusts have started to record medical errors - revealing a death toll which in previous years remained hidden under the carpet.

But experts say the true toll is certain to be even higher, because many hospitals still do not record all of the 'patient safety incidents' - meaning that lessons which could have been learned are lost.

In October last year, the Patients Association warned that one in every 300 NHS patients were killed because of medical blunder.

The latest figures, uncovered by the Liberal Democrats, show that 385 died last year due to botched operations and 156 because scans were read wrongly or patients incorrectly diagnosed.

Some 360 died from infection control incidents related to hospital superbugs and 14 due to problems with documentation and records.

Another 34 were killed by wrongly administered drugs and 40 by faulty medical equipment. There were 171 cases of deaths following simple accidents, usually falls.

On top of this, 22 died as the result of abuse by hospital staff or visitors, and 135 died because they were not transferred properly between wards or hospitals. Another 407 killed themselves on hospital premises when their depression should have been spotted by doctors.

A range of other blunders brought to total toll to 3,645.

The figures are certain to rise as hospitals get round to reporting mistakes which took place between April 2007 and March 2008 to the National Patient Safety Agency.

"These statistics are stark and the trend is shocking," said LibDem health spokesman Norman Lamb. "There needs to be a change of culture at the heart of the NHS. We have got far too many targets and there is a real risk that, although they are very effective at addressing a specific issue, they mean trusts do not see safety as a priority."

Roger Goss of pressure group Patient Concern said: "This news is shocking. Patients are already extremely nervous when they have to go to hospital, so they need this news like a hole in the head."

Peter Walsh of pressure group Action Against Medical Accidents, said many incidents are not reported in official 'patient safety' figures. He added: "We need to make patient safety a much higher priority. Staff need training and there needs to be an overhaul of surgical practice, where many avoidable errors happen.

"Double-checking that you've got the right patient, that you're operating on the right side might seem obvious, but we know that it isn't routinely done at many hospitals.

"Resources and staffing are also an issue. It's no surprise to find that more things go wrong at weekends and at night."

Concerns around the safety of many surgical operations carried out on the NHS are so serious that the all-party Commons health select committee is looking into the issue, and will report in April.

Clare Bowen, whose five-year-old daughter Bethany died as a result of mistakes made during routine surgery in 2004, said: "I have no doubt these figures will continue to rise unless hospital trusts, and surgeons in particular, are prepared to learn from their mistakes."

Mian Bowen, whose story is told in today's Good Health section, added: "Nobody should be afraid to go into hospital.

"But equally, no one should be afraid of asking questions that will make the doctors in charge of their care think carefully about how they behave."

The rise in avoidable deaths mirrors recent rises in NHS pay-outs for blunders. Around 6,000 cases go to court each year, and compensation to injured patients rose by 18 per cent last year, to £582million.

A spokesman for the Department of Health said: "The NHS sees a million people every 24 hours. Unfortunately, as in any health service, mistakes and unforeseen incidents will occasionally happen.

"Only a tiny number of errors put patients at serious risk and the quality and safety of healthcare is improving all the time."

'Learn from their mistakes'

GIVING jabs to older people against an infection which causes pneumonia is a waste of time, say researchers.

Millions of pensioners have been vaccinated with a one-off injection as part of a Government campaign launched five years ago.

But pneumococcal polysaccharide vaccine does not cut the risk of pneumonia in people aged 65 and over, compared with those who have not been vaccinated, and there was little difference in the risk of death, the Swiss researchers found.

The research - reported in the Canadian Medical Association Journal - reviewed 22 trials of the jab, which is meant to work against 23 types of pneumococcal disease bugs. It was undertaken because of conflicting results on the jab's efficacy.

PPV is also given to younger people at increased risk due to conditions such as HIV and asthma.

Dr Matthias Egger, from the University of Bern, who led the research, said the vaccination does not appear to work, even in the elderly.

But the Department of Health said: "These findings do not alter the evidence supporting UK vaccine policy."

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