

Elderly drugs deaths 'a scandal'



Some care homes are accused of misusing medication

Many elderly patients who are not terminally ill are dying because their drugs are not administered properly, according to a charity that aims to prevent the abuse of older people.

Action On Elder Abuse claims that of the 500,000 older people living in residential and nursing homes, as many as one in five is being drugged and sedated for no medical reason.

The charity, which blames the misuse of medication on low staffing and poor supervision, says relatives of the elderly are increasingly raising the alarm.

Speaking to File On 4, Action For Elder Abuse's Chief Executive, Gary Fitzgerald, said: "We know it's an extensive problem because nearly every call we take about a nursing home brings up the issue of the misuse of medication.

"We've had numerous occasions down the years where people have had a detrimental impact as a result of receiving those drugs.

“ It's a scandal yet to reach the surface of medical attention ”

"Think of someone in their 80s who's extremely frail and thin who's then given a sedative.

Gary Fitzgerald, Action For Elder Abuse

Drugs 'stockpiled'

"The impact's far greater than if given to someone in their 30s and can lead to death.

"It's a scandal yet to reach the surface of medical attention."

Mr Fitzgerald said the most common misuse of drugs was the "stockpiling" of a deceased patient's sedatives, to provide staff with supplies that can be administered without a GP's approval.

"There's also the perceived need to use medication as an alternative to staffing," he said.

"If you sedate people you don't need so many staff."

Many relatives who contact the charity about the death of an elderly person were discouraged from requesting a post mortem.

"At the time they're distressed so they go along and agree with it, then it's almost impossible to recover ground.



Baroness Knight: Not all elderly deaths are voluntary

Lords bill

"I can say with confidence that where there's been abuse and then death two or three weeks later, the death certificate isn't linking what happened when I suspect in many cases there is a link."

Another big concern of callers to the Action For Elder Abuse helpline is the denial of food and fluids.

Later this month the House of Lords will be debating a bill which would make it illegal to withhold food and drink from an elderly patient.

Baroness Knight of Coventry, who will be introducing the bill, told File On 4: "This tries to help people who don't want to die.

"We know this is happening to people who have never asked to go."

Mr Fitzgerald said this was another reflection of the way older people are perceived in society.

"People are admitted to hospitals and nursing homes with very little information about what they can do.

"There are major issues about treating and assessing older people as individuals."

The warning comes as police deal with complaints from more than 60 families after elderly patients died at Gosport War Memorial hospital in Hampshire.

The hospital has since tightened its procedures.

Listen to this edition of File On 4 on BBC Radio 4 on Sunday 16 February at 1700 GMT.

Read the transcript of a live web chat about the issues raised in this programme.