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hours. On some wards inspectors saw patients banging their bed rails to try to attract attention of medical staff, and in many hospitals the elderly were routinely forced to undergo the indignity of using commodes next to their beds because staff were too busy to take them to the lavatory.

The guidelines tell doctors they have a duty to take 'prompt action' whenever there are 'problems with basic care for patients who are unable to drink, feed or clean themselves'.

A doctor found to be in breach of them could be hauled in front of a GMC panel and in extreme cases struck off.

Niall Dickson, chief executive of the GMC, said: 'The shocking neglect of vulnerable and elderly patients revealed by recent reports shows that health professionals have to do more to ensure that every patient gets the quality of care he or she should receive, and is treated with respect.'

'Our current guidance already sets out a doctor's duty to raise concerns where they feel that patient safety is at risk. We wanted to make it even clearer that doctors have a leading role to take prompt action if they identify problems.'

'This applies not just to clinical care, but in making sure their patients are getting all the help they need to eat, drink and wash. Doctors have to be the guardians of patient safety.'

The rules are to be added to the GMC's Good Medical Practice, a handbook for doctors. They are included in a draft version published yesterday which will be reviewed by senior doctors, healthcare workers and patient groups before the final version is published next year.

But Joyce Robbins, of Patient Concern,

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Daily Mail CAMPAIGN DIGNITY FOR THE ELDERLY

said: 'It's terrifying that such guidance should be needed. What we would like to see is the GMC taking strict action against those doctors in charge of patients who are being neglected.'

Katherine Murphy, chief executive of the Patients Association, said such guidelines 'should be part of the norm'.

'Doctors should see a patient as a human and whatever their need they should be able to provide it,' she said.

'It should be as much a doctor's respon-

sibility as any other member of staff. Their duties go beyond clinical care and include dignity and respect. It's surprising and worrying that doctors need to be reminded.'

The guidelines also urge GPs to encourage patients to go back to work if they have been off sick for long periods.

They state that they may have to 'encourage patients to stay in or return to employment or other purposeful activity'.

In addition to the Mail's Dignity for the Elderly campaign, last year we launched a separate campaign with the Patients Association to highlight poor care on NHS wards.

Our coverage helped prompt the Government to order the Care Quality Commission to carry out spot-checks of hospitals to see if elderly people were properly fed and treated with dignity.

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