

Alzheimer drugs 'may be harmful'

By CELIA HALL
MEDICAL EDITOR

THOUSANDS of elderly people suffering from Alzheimer's disease and dementia are being prescribed drugs that could be making their symptoms worse, researchers said yesterday.

An estimated 30,000 people a year, most of them living in residential and nursing homes, are being given the drugs inappropriately.

Neuroleptics, also called major tranquillisers, are prescribed to make patients quieter and more manageable.

British research, to be published in the New Year, says that there is evidence that they are given too freely.

Researchers say the drugs are too often used instead of nursing care and that vulnerable people are often inadequately monitored.

Dr Clive Ballard, of the Institute for the Health of the Elderly at Newcastle

General Hospital, led the study. He said yesterday: "It is indisputable that the drugs are over prescribed.

"There is a fear that if they are discontinued there will be problems in care homes, but this is not the experience in America where there is now legislation that restricts prescribing.

"There is a problem that the drugs are used as a substitute for good, practical care management. There needs to be investment in the proper training of staff."

Dr Ballard and colleagues found that those taking the drugs suffered significantly reduced well-being, spent more time socially withdrawn and less time engaged in activities.

His research looked at a range of psychotropic drugs, those that have an effect on the mind, including neuroleptics. Patients taking neuroleptics were the worst

Continued on Page 4

TELEGRAPH

11.12.00

Continued on Page 4

This was known in the USA in
1990 - I gave the text book
Toxic Psychiatry to the Police.
Author Dr Peter Breggin - Consultant
for MIND in the UK

Alzheimer's drug fear

Continued from Page 1

affected. The research, to be published in the journal *International Psychogeriatrics*, says that many patients did not need the drugs, which could be detrimental to them.

"This is particularly true for psychotropic drugs, which had a substantially more deleterious effect upon quality of life than the target symptoms for which they were prescribed," Dr Ballard writes.

In his study, 209 elderly people with dementia living in four residential and two nursing homes in Newcastle were identified. A third of these was not taking drugs.

In a rating of quality of life 11 per cent had "ill-being", 24 per cent had poor well-being and 64 per cent had fair or good well-being.

Only a small number of

people had severe behavioural and psychological symptoms of dementia but most were receiving drugs.

"People taking neuroleptics were particularly at risk of 'ill-being'."

Dr Ballard found that more than 40 per cent of those studied were taking a neuroleptic drug, many of whom did not have clinically significant symptoms.

"Either the treatment was initiated inappropriately or the treatment had not been reviewed following the resolution of the target symptom."

Dr Ballard is about to begin a five-year study of the effect of discontinuing a neuroleptic drug in people with dementia.

Some 530,000 people suffer from Alzheimer's disease and 60,000 a year die.