

Doctors ORDERED to treat elderly with respect... but shouldn't that go without saying?

- **Half of hospitals failing to ensure patients were not becoming dehydrated or malnourished, report warns**
- **Doctors told they must become the 'guardians of patient safety'**
- **Victory for the Daily Mail's long-running Dignity for the Elderly campaign**

By [Sophie Borland](#)

Doctors are having to be ordered to ensure the elderly do not go hungry or thirsty on NHS wards.

The General Medical Council has drawn up new guidelines reminding them that their care does not begin and end with providing clinical treatment.

They are urged to be 'guardians of patient safety' and take the lead whenever there is a risk that dignity or comfort are being compromised.

But campaigners say it is 'very worrying' that doctors need to be instructed about their basic duties such as ensuring patients are helped to eat, drink or go to the lavatory.

There is growing concern that the elderly are routinely neglected in hospitals.

Earlier this month a highly critical report by the Care Quality Commission watchdog found that half of hospitals were failing to ensure patients did not become malnourished or dehydrated.

Some patients were not given anything to drink for more than ten 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.

'Doctors have to be the guardians of patient safety'

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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 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 responsibility 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.'