

# Blunders By Doctors Kill 40,000 people a Year In Britain

MEDICAL error is the third most frequent cause of death in Britain after cancer and heart disease, killing up to 40,000 people a year - about four times more than die from all other types of accident. Provisional research figures on hospital mistakes show that a further 280,000 people suffer from non-fatal drug-prescribing errors, overdoses and infections. The victims spend an average of six extra days recovering in hospital, at an annual cost of £730m in England alone.

A pilot study investigating the issue - the first attempt to measure the problem in Britain - shows that one in 14 patients suffers some kind of adverse event such as diagnostic error, operation mistake or drug reaction. Charles Vincent, head of the clinical risk unit at University College London, who is leading the study, has pioneered efforts to examine the extent of clinical errors in Britain. His team has so far concentrated on two London hospitals. The first data from one hospital showed that 32 out of 480 patients in four different departments were victims of hospital mistakes.

Vincent's estimate of 40,000 deaths comes from studies showing that 3-4% of patients in the developed world suffer some kind of harm in hospital. For 70% of them the resulting disability is short-lived, but 14% subsequently die. "It is a substantial problem," Vincent said. "There is a need to find out the true extent of error, what kind of things are going wrong and the cost." He believes the death rate may be even higher than indicated by the preliminary figures.

Britain's death rate is comparable to that in America, where recommendations in a report produced by the Kellogg Foundation three weeks ago are likely to result in the creation of a new federal agency to protect patients from medical error

The report drew on studies that examined the records of 30,195 patients and found a 3.7% error rate. Of those injured, 14% died. Researchers concluded that 70% of the errors - and 155,000 deaths - were avoidable.

Department of Health officials are now examining a proposal for a £1.2m three-year national study of 20 hospitals and 10,000 medical records to establish exactly how these avoidable deaths occur and how to prevent them.

<http://www.sunday-times.co.uk/news/pages/sti/1999/12/19/stinwenws02011.html?1281951>