

Hundreds dying because doctors lack training in prescribing drugs

by FIONA MACRAE and JENNY HOPE, Daily Mail

Hundreds of patients are dying needlessly because young doctors are not being properly trained to prescribe medicines, it is claimed.

Some of Britain's leading doctors issued a stark warning that thousands of lives are being put at risk because doctors are 'sailing through' their careers without learning how to use even basic drugs such as morphine.

Closure of university pharmacology departments and downgrading of the subject in medical training means nurses are now taught more about drugs than doctors, they said.

Official estimates suggest serious reactions to medicines account for one in every 15 admissions to hospital - and errors in prescribing are likely to cause hundreds of deaths a year.

Professor Mike Rawlins, chairman of the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence, the body responsible for treatment and 'rationing' guidelines in England, said: "Five to ten per cent of admissions to hospital are due to adverse drug reactions and the majority of these are avoidable.

"There is a serious problem about the competence of young doctors in prescribing. They feel very insecure when they go onto the wards for the first time."

He was 'not confident' that doctors were leaving medical school knowing how to use the powerful painkiller morphine, for example. He said: "I would expect a young doctor on the day he qualifies to know about morphine.

"I would expect him to know how it works, what effects it has on the brain and the spinal cord. How to give it, what sort of dose, how often to give it after a surgical operation and I would expect them also to know how to give it to people who have been on it for some time.

"These are the minimum things I would expect a young doctor to know and I couldn't guarantee they would."

Professor David Webb, of Edinburgh University, said: "We now have extremely powerful drugs and a lot of them are quite complex to use.

"But doctors are getting less and less training in the safe and effective use of medicines."

He said it was now possible to 'sail through a medical career without any assessment of how you use drugs'.

"Nurses probably get more training but it is doctors who do the majority of prescribing. We have anecdotal evidence of medical students writing to their deans concerned they are not going out in the world as safe prescribers," he added.

The pharmacologist, who is president of the Scottish Medicines Consortium, which makes drugs available on the NHS in Scotland, said: "There is no doubt that patients are becoming ill and some dying as a result of poor prescribing - and that a substantial proportion of that is undoubtedly avoidable.

"The number of deaths in the US each day from adverse drug reactions is equivalent to three jumbo jets falling out of the sky. Our medical schools could be training much better, safer doctors."

Calling for an overhaul of the training on prescribing drugs, Professor Jeffrey Aronson, of Oxford University, said: "The benefit of modern therapy is substantial but because young doctors are not being trained to prescribe properly, they can easily make errors of one sort or another."

Such errors might include prescribing the wrong drug, or the wrong dose, or not taking into account how the drug might react with other medicines the patient is already on.

The doctors said changes to undergraduate courses in the 1990s meant little pharmacology was being taught. Pharmacology departments are also being closed or merged with other departments and there is a shortage of clinical pharmacologists - the prescribing experts needed to teach students.

The warnings, which came at a press briefing in London to mark the 75th anniversary of the British Pharmacological Society, follow a major report showing 1.2 million patients a year are victims of NHS blunders and 'near misses', including medication errors.

But the hard-hitting report by the Commons Public Accounts Committee found the NHS 'simply had no idea' how many patients were dying from patient safety incidents.

A study published in the British Medical Journal last year found 6.5 per cent of patients admitted to two Merseyside hospitals were suffering from reactions to drugs including aspirin, ibuprofen, diuretic, warfarin and beta blockers. Three quarters of the reactions could have been avoided with better prescribing practice.

The researchers calculated that, nationally, reactions to drugs kill at least 5,700 people a year. Hundreds of these are likely to be due to poor prescribing by ill-trained doctors while others may be attributable to nursing or pharmacy mistakes.

The chairman of the public inquiry into the Bristol heart babies scandal is also warning the NHS is still failing to put patient safety first.

Sir Ian Kennedy said lessons have not been learned from the tragedy in which 35 babies died when surgeons were allowed to continue operating despite poor survival rates at Bristol Royal Infirmary.

Sir Ian said: "Every month that goes by in which bad, unsafe practice is not identified and rooted out and good practice shared, is a month in which more patients die or are harmed unnecessarily."

A spokesman for the British Medical Association said medical education had changed in recent years.

She said: "It varies a lot between universities, but there has been an increasing tendency for courses to focus on practical problem-solving, with less emphasis on traditional disciplines such as pharmacology and anatomy. "Some students have argued that they should have an even better grounding in skills such as pharmacology, to enhance their ability to deal with complex prescribing issues.

"However, people shouldn't get the impression that new doctors are graduating from medical school without the skills they need to practise as doctors. Medical education in the UK is world class."

A spokesman for the Department of Health said: "Patient safety is top priority for everyone in the NHS. In fact, the reform of junior doctor training, Modernising Medical Careers (MMC) last August means that all junior doctors now have to prove they are skilled in prescribing before they are able to move up to the next level of training.

"Skills junior doctors must demonstrate include being able to prescribe drugs appropriately, take accurate patient drug histories and recognise the sources of medication error and ways to minimise it."
