

Elderly being 'poisoned' by overly strong doses of medication, warns NHS chief

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- **Sarah Knapton**, science editor

The elderly are being 'poisoned' by overly strong doses of medication because drug trials are carried out on younger people, an NHS expert has warned.

Sir Munir Pirmohamed, Professor of Molecular and Clinical Pharmacology, at **Liverpool University**, and NHS chair for Pharmacogenetics, said older people were in danger of toxicity because their ageing bodies could not process powerful pills.

Many pensioners are also taking 10 to 20 different types of medication for multiple conditions leaving them at risk of dangerous adverse reactions between the drugs.

Speaking at a **House of Lords Science and Technology Committee** which is looking into ageing, Sir Munir, who is also a non-executive director for NHS England, said: "Most drugs have been tested in younger people, and tested in people without multiple diseases.

"When we use a drug at a dose that is licensed, we're often poisoning the elderly because of the doses we are using.

"This is largely because as you get older young renal function declines and you also have drug interactions.

“Most patients I see now are on 10, 15, 20 drugs, and that means you get three, four, five-way interactions, so drug reactions are common in this group and they’re often not picked up in clinical care.

“It’s very easy to prescribe drugs, but it’s very hard to stop drugs. When someone is taking 15 drugs it’s very difficult to decide which should be stopped.”

The committee heard how nearly one in 15 people in NHS hospitals are there because of adverse drug reactions, meaning there are around 8,000 beds occupied because of drug failures at any one time, costing the NHS £1.6 billion.

Previous research has shown that more than half of people in falls clinics will be taking a medication which contributes to their risk of falling. Likewise nearly 50 per cent of people admitted in a state of delirium will be taking drugs with side effects that exacerbate the condition.



Elderly people are often left taking up to 20 pills at a time CREDIT: PETER DAZELEY

Many patients simply stop taking their drugs because the side-effects, and interactions are intolerable, the committee was told.

Professor Miles Witham, the national lead for ageing at the National Institutes of Health Research (NIHR) said regulations needed to change to force pharmaceutical companies to conduct trials that involved elderly people and those with multiple conditions, taking other medications.

“Historically older people were explicitly excluded from trials,” he told peers. “There was a perception that older people were messy and they spoil nice clean trials because a lot of stuff happens to older people, they get ill, sometimes they die, or they find it difficult to come to clinic appointments.

“In the real world people with heart failure have a common age of 85, but in clinical trials the average age is 65 and that gap is extremely common whichever disease you look at.

“The evidence we gain from clinical trials is actually not fit for purpose in many cases because it doesn't apply to the people we are giving treatment to.”

Professor Witham said the NIHR were running projects in Newcastle to allow people who are house-bound or live in care homes to take part in trials.

“We need to do more of that because older people have been neglected in clinical trials,” he added.