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Chemo causing cancer deaths: review

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The review of 600 cancer patients in the UK who died within 30 days of chemotherapy treatment has found that one in four of the deaths was either caused or hastened by the treatment.

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Sara Everingham

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Transcript:

PETER CAVE: A new study has raised serious questions about the use of chemotherapy for late-stage cancer patients.

The review of 600 cancer patients in Britain who died within 30 days of treatment has found that one in four of the deaths was either caused or hastened by the chemotherapy.

Sara Everingham reports.

SARA EVERINGHAM: Chemotherapy is a standard treatment for cancer but the study questions whether seriously ill patients can cope with it.

A co-author of the report is clinical oncologist Dr Diane Morse.

DR. DIANE MORSE: We did find that of the patients that died, the chemotherapy contributed to their deaths in about a quarter of the cases.

SARA EVERINGHAM: The study was done by the National Confidential Enquiry into Patient Outcome and Deaths - its members are drawn mainly from British medical royal colleges.

Most of those patients looked at in the study had chemotherapy as palliative treatment to relieve the symptoms of cancer - a cure had already been ruled out.

The report found 40 per cent of them suffered significant poisoning as a result of the treatment.

Dr Diane Morse again.

DIANE MORSE: I think there's always a need to be cautious and it's very important that patients are fully informed of the risks as well as the potential benefits to treatment. But at the end of the day it will be the patient's decision as to whether to accept chemotherapy or not.

SARA EVERINGHAM: The study asks whether patients were given enough information about the treatment. Dr Diane Morse says in one in five cases the decision to go ahead with chemotherapy was inappropriate.

DR. DIANE MORSE: Where it was felt to be inappropriate, it was felt that the patient would probably have had better quality of life if the treatment had not been given. They were patients that were very close to the end of

life and perhaps chemotherapy was not of benefit to them.

SARA EVERINGHAM: Professor Jim Bishop the chief executive officer of the Cancer Institute of New South Wales says Australia has much better cancer survival rates than the UK but he says the study raises important questions for doctors here too.

JIM BISHOP: What it boils down to is not so much cautiousness but rather what does the evidence say? Is there good evidence that intervention at this stage will improve things, can we improve the symptoms or is it in fact, there is no evidence that this would improve the patients wellbeing. In which case that should be discussed fully with the patient and the patient be involved in that choice.

SARA EVERINGHAM: The CEO of the Cancer Council in Australia Professor Ian Olver says while chemotherapy is sometimes the best way to relieve the symptoms of cancer, some patients might not fully understand its limits.

IAN OLVER: I think you have got to be very careful that the benefit is not either overstated or that the patient doesn't believe that it is going to do more than it can.

PETER CAVE: Professor Ian Olver from the Cancer Council of Australia ending Sara Everingham's report.

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