

## Alzheimer's jumps from 24th to become the 10th biggest killer in UK in just 20 years

- **Proportion of deaths from the disease has more than doubled in 20 years**
- **Heart disease remains the most common cause of death in the UK**

By Jenny Hope

Alzheimer's disease is now one of the leading causes of death in the UK, a major study has found. The disease shot up from the 24th most common cause to the 10th between 1990 and 2010, figures show. And it continues to be one of the fastest-rising causes of death in this country. The study, published in the *Lancet*, is an analysis of worldwide data from late last year and shows how the UK is performing compared to 14 other European countries, Australia, Canada, Norway and the US.



The proportion of deaths attributed to Alzheimer's has more than doubled in 20 years (file photo)

The proportion of deaths attributed to Alzheimer's has more than doubled in 20 years, although heart disease remains the most common cause of death. Andrew Chidgey, director of external affairs at the Alzheimer's Society, said the true number of deaths which are due to the disease could be even higher as it was often not recorded as a primary cause of death. 'These figures lay out the challenge that dementia poses to the UK,' he said. 'In fact as the condition is often not recorded as a cause of death this may even be an understatement. Dementia is now one of the top ten, and fastest, rising causes of death.'

'Our population is ageing, and with numbers of people with dementia expected to soar to over a million in the next decade, the rates we are seeing today are likely to be a fraction of the numbers in future. 'At the same time, the sharp increase in the past ten years could also be a sign of greater medical understanding and recording of the condition which is something that has to be welcomed.' Across all ages, the top eight diseases responsible for the most years of life lost in the UK remained largely the same in 2010 as those reported in 1990.

# THEN AND NOW: TOP CAUSES OF DEATH

1990

- 1: Heart disease
- 2: Stroke
- 3: Lung cancer
- 4: Lower respiratory infections
- 5: Lung disease
- 6: Breast cancer
- 7: Colorectal cancer
- 8: Self-harm
- 9: Road injury
- 10: Stomach cancer

2010

- 1: Heart disease
- 2: Lung cancer
- 3: Stroke
- 4: Lung disease
- 5: Lower respiratory infections
- 6: Colorectal cancer
- 7: Breast cancer
- 8: Self-harm
- 9: Cirrhosis
- 10: Alzheimer's disease

The big change was Alzheimer's moving up 14 places to the top ten for the first time. Mr Chidgey said: 'As well as the untold human cost, dementia costs the economy £23billion a year. Despite these statistics, and the fact one in three people over the age of 65 will develop it, funding for dementia research lags far behind other conditions like cancer. 'With numbers soaring and costs trebling we need urgent action to find more effective treatments and ultimately defeat dementia.'

The five major causes of avoidable death – cancer, heart, stroke, respiratory and liver disease – kill more than 150,000 people under 75 every year, with cardiovascular disease representing about 30 per cent of all deaths. Health Secretary Jeremy Hunt said: 'Despite real progress in cutting deaths we remain a poor relative to our global cousins on many measures of health, something I want to change.'

## WE'RE LAGGING ON LONGEVITY

THE gain in life expectancy in Britain has fallen behind that of a number of other countries with similar levels of health care.

Although research published in The Lancet found life expectancy rose by 4.2 years to 79.9 between 1990 and 2010, the UK slipped from 12th to 14th in a league table of 19 comparable nations on that measure.

The study shows Britain is lagging behind in curbing premature deaths. It fell from 10th in the table in terms of years of life lost per 100,000 members of the population – which meas-

ures levels of premature death – to 14th. As well as the UK, the table covers 14 other European countries plus Australia, Canada, Norway and the US.

Co-author Professor Kevin Fenton, director of health and wellbeing at the new government agency Public Health England (PHE), said it was a 'wake-up call' for the UK.

Professor John Newton, chief knowledge officer at PHE, said: 'The data clearly show the need to redouble our efforts on smoking, high blood pressure and obesity.'

He said plans to tackle cardiovascular and other diseases – including more people trained to use defibrillators and greater take-up of NHS Health Checks – could save 30,000 lives by 2020. The study also found Britons are spending more of their later years suffering from disability including back and neck problems, often caused by arthritis.

Levels of disability at specific ages have not improved in the UK over the 20-year period. But commentator Edmund Jessop, of the London-based Faculty of Public Health, writing in *The Lancet*, said the study was not clear about how the numbers were derived, including neck pain, and whether it might have arisen from 'the British desire for compensation after whiplash in road traffic accidents'. Among the key causes of ill health are tobacco, accounting for 12 per cent of the disease burden, followed by high blood pressure and high body-mass – each contributing 9 per cent – physical inactivity, alcohol and poor diet.