Push to tackle obesity means signs of patient malnutrition are missed

By Christian Duffin

Health policy is so focused on tackling obesity that many professionals have lost sight of the fact that malnutrition is common in the UK – and are missing chances to detect it.

That is the view of nutrition experts, who warn that health professionals are not acting quickly enough when patients are rapidly losing weight.

Warning signs such as loose-fitting jewellery are sometimes ignored, said nurse Liz Jones, speaking at a conference organised by charity Age UK last week.

Dr Jones, the Department of Health’s head of patient environment and a member of its hospital food standards panel, said: ‘If someone’s wedding ring falls down the sink we have nurses, friends and families who are concerned with pulling it out, but who do not think about the reasons why it may have fallen off.

‘We need to do a lot about obesity, but we do not always think about malnutrition.’

Pay more attention

Anne Holdoway, a council member of the British Association for Parenteral and Enteral Nutrition, which raises awareness of malnutrition, said: ‘I am astounded in my work every day when I see cancer patients or people with chronic obstructive pulmonary disease who have lost 50 per cent of their body weight. This person has been to see a GP or practice nurse many times in the previous year and may look completely emaciated, but that is not questioned. Sometimes these patients walk through the door and can barely breathe – but no one asks them about their nutrition.’

Malnutrition Task Force public health nutrition consultant Lisa Wilson said health professionals need to pay more attention to ‘loose clothes, loose jewellery and loose teeth’ as signs of malnutrition.

Dr Wilson said that some carers should be less judgemental about the food choices of their loved ones who have dementia, and should generally give them what they ask for to eat – even if the request is unusual.

‘Sometimes someone with dementia might think that beef and custard is a good idea. And sometimes a patient with dementia who was always a vegetarian might say she fancies a bacon sandwich,’ she said.

Dr Jones said that carers can sometimes use dementia patients’ forgetfulness constructively to maintain good nutrition levels. ‘If a patient asks if they have had their lunch you could offer them a sandwich, even if they did have their lunch a bit earlier.’

Initiative aims to prevent second fractures

A nurse-led service aimed at reducing fractures in patients with osteoporosis has opened in Portsmouth.

The fracture liaison service (FLS) at Portsmouth’s Queen Alexandra Hospital takes referrals from people aged 50 and over who have sustained a fragility fracture. Patients are assessed by specialist nurses for their future fracture risk and prescribed bone protecting treatments where appropriate.

A personal care plan is developed, which includes advice on diet and exercise. Portsmouth FLS lead clinical nurse Jo Sayer leads a team of four specialist nurses at the clinic. ‘We prevent second fractures by identifying those at risk, educating them on staying healthy and providing treatment where necessary,’ she said.

The combined cost of hospital and social care for UK patients with a hip fracture is approximately £6 million a day.

Pictured at the opening of the new Queen Alexandra Hospital fracture service are: Jo Sayer (front right) with local National Osteoporosis Society branch chair Margo Berry, (back left to right), sisters Julie Williams, Ellen Richards, Amanda Finnegan and Julia Penketh