

# Brain diseases affecting more people and starting earlier than ever before

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Professor Colin Pritchard's latest research published in *Public Health* journal has found that the sharp rise of dementia and other neurological deaths in people under 74 cannot be put down to the fact that we are living longer – the rise is because a higher proportion of old people are being affected by such conditions, and what is really alarming, it is starting earlier and affecting people under 55 years.

Of the 10 biggest Western countries the USA had the worst increase in all neurological deaths, men up 66% and women 92% between 1979-2010. The UK was 4th highest, men up 32% and women 48%. In terms of numbers of deaths, in the UK, it was 4,500 and now 6,500, in the USA it was 14,500 now more than 28,500 deaths!

Professor Pritchard of Bournemouth University says: "These statistics are about real people and families, and we need to recognise that there is an 'epidemic' that clearly is influenced by environmental and societal changes."

Tessa Gutteridge, Director YoungDementia UK says that our society needs to learn that dementia is increasingly affecting people from an earlier age: "The lives of an increasing number of families struggling with working-age dementia are made so much more challenging by services which fail to keep pace with their needs and a society which believes dementia to be an illness of old age."

Bournemouth University researchers, Professor Colin Pritchard and Dr

Andrew Mayers, along with the University of Southampton's Professor David Baldwin show that there are rises in total neurological deaths, including the dementias, which are starting earlier, impacting upon patients, their families and health and social care services, exemplified by an 85% increase in UK [Motor Neurone Disease](#) deaths.

The research highlights that there is an alarming 'hidden epidemic' of rises in neurological deaths between 1979-2010 of adults (under 74) in [Western countries](#), especially the UK.

Total neurological deaths in both men and women rose significantly in 16 of the countries covered by the research, which is in sharp contrast to the major reductions in deaths from all other causes.

Over the period the UK has the third biggest neurological increase, up 32% in men and 48% in women, whilst women's neurological deaths rose faster than men's in most countries.

Professor Pritchard said, "These rises in neurological deaths, with the earlier onset of the dementias, are devastating for families and pose a considerable public health problem. It is NOT that we have more old people but rather more old people have more brain disease than ever before, including Alzheimer's. For example there are two new British charities, The Young Parkinson's Society and Young [Dementia](#) UK, which are a grass-roots response to these rises. The need for such charities would have been inconceivable a little more than 30 years ago."

When asked what he thought caused the increases he replied,

"This has to be speculative but it cannot be genetic because the period is too short. Whilst there will be some influence of more elderly people, it does not account for the earlier onset; the differences between countries nor the fact that more women have been affected, as their lives have

changed more than men's over the period, all indicates multiple environmental factors. Considering the changes over the last 30 years – the explosion in electronic devices, rises in background non-ionising radiation- PC's, micro waves, TV's, mobile phones; road and air transport up four-fold increasing background petro-chemical pollution; chemical additives to food etc. There is no one factor rather the likely interaction between all these environmental triggers, reflecting changes in other conditions. For example, whilst cancer deaths are down substantially, cancer incidence continues to rise; levels of asthma are unprecedented; the fall in male sperm counts - the rise of auto-immune diseases - all point to life-style and environmental influences. These 'statistics' are about real people and families, and we need to recognise that there is an 'epidemic' that clearly is influenced by environmental and societal changes."

**More information:** Pritchard C, Mayers, A, Baldwin D (2013) Changing patterns of neurological mortality in the 10 major developed countries 1979-2010. *Public Health*.

[www.publichealthjrn.com/article/S0033-3506%2812%2900467-2/fulltext](http://www.publichealthjrn.com/article/S0033-3506%2812%2900467-2/fulltext)

Provided by Bournemouth University

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