Half of older adults now die with a dementia diagnosis, up sharply from two decades ago
1 April 2022

Nearly half of all older adults now die with a diagnosis of dementia listed on their medical record, up 36% from two decades ago, a new study shows.

But that sharp rise may have more to do with better public awareness, more detailed medical records and Medicare billing practices than an actual rise in the condition, the researchers say.

The biggest jump in the percentage of people dying with a dementia diagnosis happened around the time Medicare allowed hospitals, hospices and doctors' offices to list more diagnoses on their requests for payment.

But around this same time, the National Plan to Address Alzheimer's Disease also went into effect, with a focus on public awareness, quality of care and more support for patients and their caregivers.

The end-of-life care that patients with dementia received changed somewhat overtime, including a drop in the percentage who died in a regular hospital bed or a ICU bed, or who had a feeding tube in their last six months. The percentage who received hospice services rose dramatically, from 36% to nearly 63%, though the authors note this is in line with a national trend toward more hospice care by the late 2010s.

"This shows we have far to go in addressing end-of-life care preferences proactively with those who are recently diagnosed, and their families," said Julie Bynum, M.D., Ph.D., senior author of the study and a professor of geriatric medicine at Michigan Medicine. "Where once the concern may have been underdiagnosis, now we can focus on how we use dementia diagnosis rates in everything from national budget planning to adjusting how Medicare reimburses Medicare Advantage plans."
