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How common is emergency department as a death place in Portugal and who is more likely to die there?

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Background: Most people would prefer to die at home but most die in hospitals or other healthcare settings. Some of the latter deaths may have taken place in Emergency Departments (EDs), as EDs are a major hospital gateway. However, EDs have not been consistently categorised as a place of death (PoD) across countries. Portugal is an exception. This study aimed to examine trends in deaths at EDs in Portugal from 2015 to 2021, identifying who is more likely to die at the ED.

Methods: We obtained national death certificate data on PoD for 2015 to 2021 from the the Portuguese General-Directorate for Health. We analysed the percentage of deaths taking place at the ED by sex, age group (0-17y, 18-49y, 50-69y, 70-79y, ≥80y), underlying cause of death (cancer, dementia, and other causes) and year of death.

Results: 804.971 people died in Portugal from 2015-2021 (50.1% male; 0.4% aged 0-17y, 58.0% aged ≥80y; 23.3% died from cancer, 5.6% from dementia, and 71.1% from other causes). Of these, 13.2% died at the ED. The percentage of ED deaths was higher in female (13.7% vs. 12.8% in male), in adults (13.3% vs. 9.0% in children), in those dying from dementia (15.7% compared to 9.6% in cancer and 14.3% in other causes). The percentage of ED deaths rose from 10.6% in 2015 to 14.3% in 2021, increasing steadily over time (average 0.6 percentual points per year, representing 1069 additional deaths per year).

Conclusions: One in every ten deaths in Portugal happens at ED and this is increasing. Patients with non-cancer conditions are more likely to die at the ED, in particular those dying from dementia. To understand if this reality compares with other countries, we are

developing a pioneering international classification of place of death which includes the ED. Funding: European Research Council (agreement nr. 948609).

Key messages:

- Emergency department (ED) is a significant PoD in Portugal and has increased from 10.6% to 14.3% (2015-2021). Non-cancer patients, especially those with dementia, more likely to die at ED.
- This study highlights the need for an international place of death classification to compare emergency department death trends across countries.