

Vulnerable girls of 10 given contraceptive implant by NHS chiefs

By **Laura Donnelly, Health Editor**

GIRLS as young as 10 have been given the contraceptive implant by the NHS, figures show.

Charities raised concern that the practice was putting vulnerable girls at increased risk of abuse, while doctors said they were fearful about the long-term effects of the powerful hormones on pre-teenage girls.

NHS trusts said the decision had been taken in "exceptional circumstances" and in order to safeguard a child, or for health reasons.

Two girls of 10 are among thousands of NHS cases in which the long-acting contraceptive devices have been implanted in those below the age of 16.

Freedom of Information disclosures show that in the last five years, almost 10,000 slow-acting implants have been placed in girls below the age of consent.

Implants were given to 56 girls aged 12 or younger, with 281 cases involving girls of 13, the figures show.

More than 3,000 cases involved girls of 14, with 6,000 implants given to 15-year-

olds, disclosures from 61 of 160 NHS trusts show.

University Hospitals of Leicester trust and East Lancashire NHS trust each disclosed carrying out the procedure on girls of 10, despite the fact the implants have never been tested on under-18s. South Devon Healthcare Foundation Trust said it had provided an implant to a girl of 10 or 11.

The NHS trusts declined to describe the circumstances of the cases, citing patient confidentiality.

The Department of Health said such cases were "extremely rare" and likely to result from doctors acting on serious concerns about exploitation or abuse.

The contraceptive implant is a small flexible tube about 40mm long which is inserted under the skin of the upper arm, and works by stopping the release of an egg from the ovary by releasing progesterone into the body.

It is inserted by a trained healthcare professional and lasts for three years.

Makers of the leading implants, Nexplanon, said the contraceptive's "efficacy" had only been established in women

aged between 18 and 40. Norman Wells, from the Family Education Trust, said: "This casual and relaxed attitude towards underage sex is exposing young people to the most horrendous abuse.

"The fact that the safety of these implants has not been established for girls under the age of 18 in itself means that health professionals are taking a massive risk with the immediate and long-term health of these girls."

Ann Furedi, chief executive of the British Pregnancy Advisory Service, said some teenagers might end up having implants because they have requested them and intend to be sexually active and doctors felt it was the best way to protect them.

All the trusts insisted that decisions were never taken lightly.

A spokesman for the Leicester trust said: "Only under extremely rare circumstances would a patient under the age of 13 ever receive a contraceptive implant. It would be a decision made between a health care professional and the parent or guardian as a result of health problems or in order to safeguard the child."