

New rules make it easier

to 'hide strain on NHS'

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HEALTH EDITOR

HEALTH chiefs have been accused of covering up the strains on the NHS by changing the rules for when hospitals say they are struggling to cope.

An internal NHS document reveals that hospitals have been banned from declaring a "major incident" even if they are so overcrowded that patient safety is at risk.

In addition, trusts can no longer go on "black" alert, which is used to indicate when they are so overwhelmed that patient safety is at very high risk, except in highly unusual circumstances. These include patients being at risk in all the other hospitals in the area.

Hospitals' declarations of

"major incidents" and "black alerts" have previously drawn media attention to their difficulties. At least a dozen trusts had declared major incidents or black alerts by this time last winter after more patients came through accident and emergency departments than there were beds available.

Senior doctors say hospitals are going through similar pressures this winter, but the new restrictions on alerts make it harder for the public to know what is going on.

Dr Adrian Boyle, who chairs the quality in emergency care committee of the Royal College of Emergency Medicine, said: "We are clear as a college that clinicians, if they feel that patient safety is at risk, should always be able to call a major incident."

He added that while trusts were allowed to use different language, declaring alerts such as "significant internal incidents" or "critical" incidents, they were no longer able to declare "major incidents".

An official NHS England document, seen by The Sunday Times, states: "Acute hospitals . . . should reserve the declaration of a major incident for when an organisation requires formal multi-agency response. For example, fire, flood or infectious disease outbreak."

The document also sets out the exceptional circumstances when hospitals can now declare a black alert, the most severe status level.

It says: "It would be extremely rare and the reasons exceptional for a single organisation to declare 'black'

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status whilst any of the [local NHS trusts] were reporting pressure less than 'red' level." At red, hospitals are being overwhelmed by demand and have very few beds.

The document, which was issued quietly in August, also sets out 18 measures to alleviate overcrowding. The trusts are expected to have exhausted these "minimum actions" before moving to black alert.

They include cancellation of routine operations, the cancellation, where possible, of urgent operations, and "raising of access thresholds to prevent admissions where possible".

Andrew Gwynne, Labour's shadow health minister, said: "This looks like another cynical attempt to cover up bad news about the NHS."

Joyce Robins, co-director of

Patient Concern, a health campaign group, said: "This plan is an attempt to prevent the media reporting the dire problems facing our health service."

Figures for the week ending December 6, 2015, showed 23 trusts had had to close their A&E departments to new patients, with ambulances diverted to other hospitals. This compared with 19 for the same period last winter.

An NHS England spokesman said that the guidance had been issued to distinguish between overcrowding and extreme events such as ebola, flooding or Paris-style terror attacks.

"While hospitals are under pressure, they are generally saying they coped better over Christmas and new year than last year."