

GPs are still being paid to avoid cancer test referrals

Chris Smyth Health Editor

Family doctors are still being paid to cut the number of patients they refer for urgent cancer tests, in a practice branded ethically wrong by medical leaders.

Local health chiefs have defied instructions from NHS England to end the payments, despite warnings that they could cost lives.

Doctors in some part of the country are rewarded for not sending patients for tests and consultations with specialists, including those suspected of having cancer. Health chiefs insist that the incentive schemes are designed to avoid needless hospital visits, and to cut costs. Patient groups said that the NHS needed more cancer tests, to catch up with survival rates in the rest of Europe.

Last year *Pulse* magazine revealed the widespread use of money-saving schemes that paid GPs if they cut referrals, prompting an outcry from doctors' leaders. At least two areas of the country have persisted with the payments, however. In northeast Lincolnshire

surgeries will be given about £6,000 if they match referral rates of practices that send the fewest patients to hospital. This includes urgent cancer referrals. In Lambeth, south London, surgeries are paid if they get down to the average referral rate.

Tim Ballard, the vice-chairman of the Royal College of GPs, said: "Offering GPs money not to refer patients for further treatment is a preposterous idea, one that is insulting to our professional integrity and ethically wrong."

He said that it undermined patient trust, adding: "We are deeply disappointed that some clinical commissioning groups are not listening to our concerns and pushing ahead with these plans with no intention of reviewing them."

Rosie Loftus, the joint chief medical officer of Macmillan Cancer Support, warned that the payments were a symptom of a health service that was struggling to cope. "Under no circumstance should GPs be put under pressure to not refer people who might have

cancer against their clinical judgment, in order to meet targets," she said.

"England's cancer survival rates are already among the worst in Europe and those who do survive often live with debilitating conditions as a result of treatment. A key reason for this is inadequate access to cancer tests and treatment."

Peter Melton, of the North East Lincolnshire CCG, said that after local discussions "we have been able to provide assurance that those concerns are not being seen in practice".

Lambeth CCG said that the scheme had been reviewed after criticism, adding: "Between April and September 2015, our two-week pathway for cancer referrals had increased by 13 per cent compared with the same period last year."

NHS England said: "Nice [the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence] has set out evidence-based guidelines for when patients should be referred, and no CCG incentive scheme should in anyway cut across that."

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