

Rip-off prices stop cancer patients getting new drugs

Chris Smyth Health Editor

Patients will be denied cutting-edge medicines because drugs companies are overcharging the NHS, the head of the treatments watchdog has said.

As the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (Nice) regains full control of cancer drug assessments, it warns that new medicines will continue to be rejected unless companies lower their prices.

"It's very much in their hands," Sir Andrew Dillon, Nice chief executive, said. Voters demonstrate an understandable contradiction when they demand efficient use of NHS money and then attack Nice for rejecting drugs that are not cost-effective, he added.

Charities and the drugs industry have condemned the dismantling of the £340 million a year Cancer Drug Fund, promised by David Cameron at the 2010 election to give access to medicines rejected as poor value by Nice. After overspends of more than £160 million, the budget will instead be

handed to Nice to gather "real world" data as part of its assessment process.

In an interview with *The Times*, Sir Andrew said that it was not surprising that the removal of cost controls had led to spiralling spending, and accused companies of using the fund as an opportunity to charge more.

"In the early days of NHS England's ownership of it, companies must have looked at the fund and thought [it was] an opportunity to relax their approach to pricing," he said.

Campaigners have warned that the changes would send the NHS back to the days when British patients were routinely denied new cancer drugs that were available in other countries.

Sir Andrew said: "The reason that they're raising that concern is that they can see our methods are not changing significantly. Fundamentally it depends on companies' pricing policies.

"Companies will charge what the market will bear. And that's different in different countries."

After NHS England tried to rein in

the CDF budget by threatening to stop buying expensive drugs, companies agreed to drop prices. Notably Kadcylla, a breast cancer drug deemed too expensive by Nice, remained on the fund after Roche, its maker, offered a big last-minute discount to its original estimated price of £90,000 per patient.

"It clearly is possible for the companies to be flexible," Sir Andrew said. "Clearly there's some more mileage in this which we do need to work with companies to explore and exploit."

Mark Flannagan, chief executive of Beating Bowel Cancer, who has campaigned for reform of the system, said Sir Andrew's comments were absolutely infuriating and failed to recognise Nice's responsibility to move with the times.

"It's back to the bad old days," he said. "When you get the mindset that 'we're not going to change and so it's purely about price' you're into a Mexican stand-off with the pharmaceutical industry and patients are caught in the middle."

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