

GPs make care home residents

for treatments pay 'that should be free'

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Care home residents are being ripped off by GPs who are charging them up to £26 million a year for treatment which they are entitled to free on the NHS, a survey suggests.

Hundreds of thousands of people are treated as "second-class citizens" because doctors refuse to visit care homes to treat them, research by the Alzheimer's Society found.

Jeremy Hughes, chief executive of the charity, said: "I think we should be just as outraged as if you walked through the surgery doors and were asked to pay a bill. In their hour of need, some people with dementia, who have paid their taxes throughout their lives, are paying again to see a GP through their care home fees."

A survey of almost 300 care homes by the charity found that one in five were charged by GPs for visits to provide basic care, with some paying £36,000 a year. "What's happened is GPs are seeing the opportunity to recover some of their costs and they are

sending the bill to someone they think will pay," Mr Hughes said. "In some places, GPs are getting away with charges that are unacceptable."

The NHS is obliged to offer primary care free of charge to everyone, but Mr Hughes argues that some doctors have taken advantage of a grey area in health service rules which state that they can charge for "enhanced services".

While some areas have good services such as "virtual GP practices" that send doctors to care homes, today's report argues that in many parts of the country health chiefs have failed to plan for the needs of care home residents, especially the 280,000 with dementia — 70 per cent of the total.

On average, homes have to pay £12,191 a year for a couple of hours a week of GP time, with huge variations in fees, the survey found. "We've got no evidence that you get more for £36,000," Mr Hughes said.

More than one in four care homes could go bust by 2019 as revenue falls, wage bills rise and debts are racked up to cover maintenance and building work, according to analysis by Opus, the business risk analysts, on behalf of

the BBC. Mr Hughes added: "We've got cash-strapped care homes paying money into the NHS for something the NHS should be providing anyway."

Most care home residents have conditions that require GP care, but doctors are often reluctant to visit patients who cannot come to the surgery. The survey found that almost half of care homes were not receiving regular visits from family doctors.

Dementia patients have been given the wrong drugs or left with broken bones because GPs would only talk to them over the phone, the report states. Residents with mental health problems are often given a "chemical cosh" of antipsychotic drugs rather than proper care, Mr Hughes said.

"They're being robbed of essential care and pain relief, as well as their dignity, self-esteem and independence," he added.

Martin Green, chief executive of Care England, which represents care homes and helped to carry out the survey, said that patients were being abandoned by GPs. "Older people living with dementia in care homes have the same rights to primary care,

health and support as any other citizen, and the government and NHS must act to ensure that these services are available to everyone when they are needed," he added.

Janet Morrison, chief executive of the older people's charity Independent Age, said: "The tens of thousands of pounds that GPs are charging care homes will, ultimately, be passed on to older people and their families.

"All too often vulnerable older people in care homes are getting a second-rate service and paying for the privilege. This must change."

Richard Vautrey, deputy chairman of the GP committee of the British Medical Association, denied that doctors were charging for basic care. "A very small number of practices receive extra payments from nursing homes in order to cover the costs of providing additional services, over and above routine care, such as regular ward rounds," he said.

An NHS England spokesman said that GPs should not charge for basic services, adding: "Care homes have first-line responsibility for looking after their residents, with appropriate back-up from the local NHS."

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