

Hospital cost-cutting means babies pay with their lives, doctors warn

Chris Smyth Health Editor

Babies are dying needlessly because hospitals resist sending them to specialists in order to save money, senior doctors have said.

Pregnant women and their babies have suffered avoidable harm because of a perverse funding system that delays access to the most expert care, they have warned health chiefs.

Seven consultants from four hospitals say that they have seen "multiple cases" where sick babies were harmed because of the way money flows through the NHS for foetal medicine.

Local hospitals have an incentive to "hold on" to the sickest patients to avoid paying specialist centres to treat them properly, the doctors say in a letter seen by the *Health Service Journal*.

In one case a pregnant woman lost her baby after a month's delay in seeking more expert help. After a scan at a local hospital failed to get a clear view of the foetus, she was told to come back

in a few weeks instead of going to a specialist unit. A consultant finally diagnosed an abnormal build-up of fluid in the foetus and the woman was rushed to a specialist unit, where doctors found that her baby had died.

A post-mortem examination judged that this was a preventable death from a condition that could have been dealt with earlier.

The consultants say that the problems are the result of NHS England's decision not to fund foetal medicine from its specialised care budget, but to tell hospitals to pay for it out of the general maternity pot. Specialist units are told to send the bill for treatment to the local hospitals that refer patients, but this often costs those hospitals far more than they receive through the "maternity tariff" paid for each patient.

Doctors say local hospitals are therefore trying to avoid expensive referrals to specialists and that babies are dying unnecessarily as a result.

In the letter, sent last summer, the

doctors also say that many local hospitals are refusing to pay bills when they get them, causing financial problems for the specialist units.

They urge NHS England urgently to review funding arrangements that pose a "significant risk to women and babies".

"We have identified multiple cases where women and babies have been subject to avoidable harm as a direct result of these commissioning changes," the consultants say.

An NHS England spokesman said: "Clinicians and their teams should always seek to ensure that women get the best and most appropriate care for them, with good governance of units and collaborative commissioning across networks being central to achieving this.

"Clinicians will shortly have the opportunity to suggest improvements to the tariff system for 2017-18 through the annual consultation run by NHS Improvement and NHS England."

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