

Bogus pain tests used to 'ration' hip surgery

Patients forced to prove they are suffering severe discomfort as doctors attack cost-cutting move

By Henry Bodkin

BOGUS "pain tests" are being used to ration hip and knee surgery for eligible patients in one in 10 local health areas, it has emerged. Patients with "crum-

bling" joints are increasingly having to prove they are suffering severe discomfort before being referred for treatment, despite guidelines requiring action to be taken to prevent pain interfering with everyday life.

Doctors' leaders last night denounced the practice, but warned patients to expect ever more "arbitrary restrictions" on referrals from cash-strapped local commissioners.

Analysis of regional affiliations of GP practices, known as clinical commis-

sioning groups (CCGs), found 24 out of 209 had adopted pain-scoring criteria to limit access to surgery.

Of 19 CCGs which have adopted the Oxford Hip Score and the Oxford Knee Score, 16 insist that patients reach a pain score of "severe" before being referred for treatment.

A further five groups in the East of England were found to be using the "New Zealand" pain-scoring system, but the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence, which sets eligi-

bility guidelines, says there is "no evidence" to support the use of either.

Overall, 84 CCGs demand that patients demonstrate either "severe" or "moderate to severe" pain before surgery, whether or not by use of a scoring system, according to analysis by the UK Orthopaedics Industry Group shared with the *Health Service Journal*.

Clare Marx, president of the Royal College of Surgeons, said people with osteoarthritis can quickly lose mobility, balance and confidence if not

treated promptly. "Nobody should be left to get to this stage of pain," she said.

"These conditions don't go away, and by delaying treatment CCGs are just kicking the can down the road.

"You might then have a crumbling hip that is more complicated to replace, and patients will take longer getting back on their feet."

She added: "This is going to become more common - people are going to see more and more arbitrary restrictions on having surgery." Board papers

from a West Midlands CCG reveal it could save over £2million a year by imposing the severe pain requirement.

NHS Providers, which represents the hospital sector, yesterday condemned the approach of local health bosses and said CCGs must act within national guidelines. "If treatment has to be restricted, the choices required should be managed on an NHS-wide basis, rather than piecemeal," said Saffron Cordery, director of policy and strategy at the organisation.