

NHS hospital sells access to proton cancer therapy

Chris Smyth Health Editor

The NHS is to sell private patients access to its proton-beam therapy machine in order to raise money.

University College Hospital (UCLH) in London has struck a deal with a US company that will allow paying patients to benefit from the £125 million cancer treatment equipment alongside NHS users.

Bosses said that the deal would raise money for the hospital without affecting care, but Labour has criticised a deal that could see the wealthy paying to use a machine to which they have been denied access on the NHS.

Proton-beam therapy is a high-energy form of radiotherapy that is more accurate at targeting tumours without damaging surrounding tissue. It is used on many childhood cancers and brain tumours where side effects of radiotherapy are potentially more severe.

The therapy was at the centre of intense public debate in 2014 when the parents of five-year-old Ashya King provoked an international manhunt when they tried to take him for proton-



Ashya King's parents tried to take him to Prague for the cancer treatment

beam therapy in Prague against the advice of NHS doctors.

The NHS sends about 400 children a year abroad for proton-beam therapy, but is spending £250 million to build two of its own machines in London and Manchester. These will treat 1,500 people with complex cancers a year.

Some doctors believe the therapy could be a better bet than conventional radiotherapy for many other cancers, including those of the prostate, breast, stomach, liver and lung.

The UCLH deal with the US company Proton International allows it to treat about 200 private patients a year

whose cancers the NHS will not treat with proton-beam therapy.

Catherine Pollard, director of strategic development at UCLH said: "Both NHS and private patients will be able to benefit from this advanced treatment."

The hospital insisted that NHS patients would not lose any access to the machine and would benefit from the money brought in by the deal, whose value has not been disclosed. The treatment costs up to £100,000 in some private centres.

However, at the start of a general election campaign where Labour will focus on the NHS, the deal has reopened the debate over the role of paying patients within the health service.

Jonathan Ashworth, the shadow health secretary, said: "This is more damning evidence that a two-tier system is emerging in our NHS. The truth is if Theresa May is re-elected we will see more and more patients who can't afford to pay pushed to the back of the queue."

Reforms five years ago lifted caps on the amount of money NHS hospitals can raise from private patients.

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