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NHS accused of 'culling the sick' as it stops paying fares for dialysis patients

Charities angered by plans to cut travel subsidies for hundreds of patients who require kidney treatment

By Laura Donnelly HEALTH EDITOR

THE NHS has been accused of "culling the sick" after drawing up plans to stop funding transport for dialysis patients.

Under the proposals, patients with kidney failure living in rural areas will be expected to make their own way to hospital for treatment, which some say will cost them hundreds of pounds in buses and taxis.

Charities called the plans outrageous and said they were "extremely worried" that patients, especially the elderly and vulnerable, would die as a result of the changes planned by the NHS in Cornwall.

Patients who receive treatment three times a week said they would have to spend hundreds of pounds on trans-

port, with even bus fares amounting to more than £100 a month, under the plans drawn up by Kernow Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG).

Fiona Loud, from charity Kidney Care UK, said patients have told her they would have to forego food or heating to be able to afford to go for the hospital treatment.

The CCG said the transport policy had been standardised so that the same rules applied to patients wherever they lived. Under the planned changes, affecting more than 160 dialysis patients, as well as patients with cancer, free transport will no longer automatically be provided. Each case will be reviewed by senior managers.

Ms Loud said: "We believe that access to dialysis – a life-saving treatment – should not be assessed on a person's ability to pay." She said patients should not normally drive after treatment, which can affect their blood pressure.

Jeremy Taylor, chief executive of charity National Voices, said the stark measures could risk lives. He said:

"This feels unprecedented, but it is part of wider cuts having to be made across the NHS, often below the radar, and drawn up behind closed doors."

Paul Crowthor, whose wife travels 18 miles from St Austell to the Royal Cornwall Hospital at Treliske for dialysis, said: "For us, going to Treliske three times a week will cost £75. That's £300 a month," Mr Crowthor, 58, told Cornwall Live.

"The CCG is culling the sick."

Kidney Care UK said health officials have agreed to "pause" the plans for four weeks, following the concerns, with a meeting with the charity due to take place this week.

Under the plans, patients in receipt of benefits will be entitled to free travel costs, while those on low incomes may be eligible for some refunds.

Robert White, clinical lead for elective care at from NHS Kernow, said: "We have revised our policy to provide clarity on what will and won't be funded. This will ensure everyone is assessed in the same way."