

Old Grey Matter article published March 4th in the EADT

Worried citizens: It's time to say 'Enough!'

The latest newsletter of the National Pensioners Convention Health and Social Care Working Party paints a frankly bleak scenario for the elderly frail. Thousands of pensioners could be forced into care homes against their will under NHS cost cutting plans. More than 13,000 elderly people are expected to be affected as health authorities refuse to fund care in their own homes. At least 37 Clinical Commissioning Groups (CCGs) have drawn up new restrictions governing care for elderly and disabled patients, Freedom of Information disclosures reveal. Responses from 122 of the country's 209 CCGs show that authorities have ruled that they would not pay for help at home if it was cheaper to send pensioners to a care home. Not only does this go against Government policy of keeping people in their own homes, it ignores the fact that in certain areas there is already a grave shortage of care home spaces.

Simon Bottery, from charity Independent Age, said: "It is frankly outrageous that older people could be made to move into residential care when they are able to live independently in their own home." The investigation by Health Service Journal and campaigners Disability United examined NHS policies on Continuing Healthcare - a fund which pays for care of those whose needs are primarily medical. Around 19 of the 37 CCGs in question have banned paying for care at home if the cost exceeds that of residential homes by more than 10 per cent. Another seven said they had set the threshold at 20, 25 or 40 per cent above care home fees. Several said they might be open to accusations that the restrictions breached human rights, but believed they could justify the decisions on cost grounds.

Former care minister and Lib Dem MP Norman Lamb said it was "scandalous". He said: "If someone is able to live independently forcing them to live in a care home is outrageous. It treats people as second class citizens." However, a Department of Health spokeswoman said: "It does not fall to us to approve an individual CCG's policy." Around 300,000 pensioners in England and Wales are living in a care home at any given time, a clear majority of them over the age of 85.

Nor do the Government's Sustainability & Transformation Plans (STPs) paint a better picture – most are very vague, particularly on finance. Plans were mostly published without consultation even with healthcare staff and councils. They have simply been imposed even onto most CCGs. Some councils are waking up to the reality. In Cheshire West and Chester, Sefton, Wirral and Liverpool have all rejected the STP. The plans are about cuts and take £22billion from NHS services over the next five years. In one area alone, that means cutting 1.85 million gross, or around 1.5 billion after the NHS payment for delivering the plan has been taken into account. Cuts on this scale cannot be absorbed any longer. Cuts were previously hidden from the public under the title of 'efficiency savings'. Already services are lost, operations rationed, staff morale is at an all-time low.

This new draconian round of cuts will inevitably lead to more closures, more rationing, and an increasing loss of staff ... and our remaining services moved to locations not easily accessible to the less mobile and more sick. This, to the NPC is simply outrageous and should be challenged by citizens of one of the richest nations in the world.

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