

Waiting list crisis as NHS cuts costs



David Rose

Drastic cost-cutting ordered by the Government across the NHS has derailed its flagship policy to ensure that no patient waits longer than 18 weeks for hospital treatment.

A [leaked e-mail](#) seen by The Times reveals that the Department of Health is so worried that new data showing that some patients will have to wait “in excess of one year” will be highlighted by the media that it has issued special guidance on how to spin the news.

The Government is expected to announce today that the NHS has made a surplus of more than £500 million in the past financial year after an aggressive drive to reduce spending by health trusts.

The e-mail says that more than half of patients are still waiting longer than 18 weeks for treatment. It calls into question the Government’s ability to honour its key health pledge that all patients would be treated within this time by the end of 2008.

The memo, containing advice from the Department of Health sent to local NHS communications managers, reveals that 52 per cent of hospital inpatients are waiting longer than 18 weeks across the country. Full data on the situation will be published for the first time by the Government tomorrow.

Ministers have pledged that by the end of next year no patients should wait longer than that time after being referred by their doctors.

The e-mail contains advice from the Department of Health for local NHS communications managers on how to handle media inquiries on publication of the figures and outlines “overarching messages” for press officers to quote in an apparent attempt to spin the story.

It says: “The [referral to treatment] data due to be published on 7 June is a brand new data collection . . . While this new measurement – from referral to treatment – better reflects the patient experience, there are some issues for communicators to be aware of.

“The data will show variations in referral to treatment waiting times across your area by provider and commissioner. It will also show differences by specialty.

“There will be some long waits – of up to, and in excess of one year, in some areas.

“There is a risk that the media’s attention will focus around long waits, and make claims that these new, more transparent measures of waiting times, undermine the effort to date to tackle waiting in the NHS.”

The e-mail, circulated by a press officer from the South Central Strategic Health Authority (SHA), appears to have been sent in error to a number of local MPs, including David Cameron.

Peter Campion, the SHA’s head of communications and author of the e-mail, writes that the waiting time figures “have potential to generate negative inquiries locally”, but warns colleagues that they are “hamstrung” to prepare

responses before the local data is revealed.

The memo also suggests that differences seen across regions might be used as further evidence for a “postcode lottery” of treatment in the NHS.

Patricia Hewitt, the Health Secretary, is expected to announce today that the health service underspent by up to £500 million last year. She put pressure on local health chiefs to make savings after promising to resign if the NHS went into the red in 2006-07. But the drive to balance the books is thought to have come at the expense of other services, and attempts to cut waiting times.

The 18-week target, set in 2004, is widely considered to be among the most ambitious of the Government’s aims for the NHS. A baseline estimate published in December suggested that 35 per cent of patients across the country were treated within this time.

At that time up to a quarter of patients needing operations such as hip or knee replacements were estimated to wait between one and two years for surgery, with a small number waiting longer than this.

The figures showed that most specialities treat between 30 and 50 per cent of inpatients within 18 weeks. In trauma and orthopaedics the figure is only 20 per cent.

The Government has set an interim target of 85 per cent of admitted patients and 90 per cent of nonadmitted to be treated within 18 weeks by March next year.

A spokesperson for the Department of Health said that the data concerning waiting times would be set out tomorrow. “This data is bound by the publication protocols of national statistics and we will not be commenting ahead of publication,” she said.

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