

Save Lewisham Hospital Campaign

Letter to Lewisham and Greenwich NHS Trust Staff, August 2019

NHS CHARGES IN LEWISHAM - THE HOSTILE ENVIRONMENT

DO YOU KNOW WHAT IS HAPPENING IN OUR TRUST AND THE NHS?

Since the law changed in 2015 many people are no longer deemed 'ordinarily resident' in the UK and are charged for all NHS care at 150% of cost price except for emergency care. This has put many lives at risk and caused great hardship for many of our local residents. Since 2017 this policy has been further ramped up by the Government with more and more pressure being put on Trusts to collect money from those deemed as 'non-resident'.

CARD READERS HAVE ARRIVED IN THE NHS

Due to this policy, card readers are being brought to the heart of our health service, previously free at the point of use. This will make it easier to introduce charges for all of us in the future.

Lewisham and Greenwich NHS Trust was an early operator in preparing to charge for health care. It is one of the highest referrers to debt collection agencies in England of patients who have been charged for their care (Guardian, Chaminda Jayanetti, 23 June 2013)

UNFAIR, DANGEROUS, DISCRIMINATORY

Migrants are not 'health tourists' looking for free treatment – they are vulnerable and sometimes destitute people, many of whom are looking for resident status in the UK. Being charged upfront for treatment can lead to distress and fear, discouraging patients from attending for essential treatment for themselves or their children. This can potentially lead to more serious health issues. Denial of application for residence by the Home Office can occur if an unpaid debt is reported to them.

Pregnant women are particularly vulnerable and over 500 were asked to pay £6000 - £9,000 for having a baby (Freedom of Information response from LG Trust to SLH Campaign, December 2018). We know that many women are put off by this charge and that there have been serious consequences for them and their future child's health.

We all lose through migrant health charges – they are unfair, unsafe and expensive to collect while generating very little income overall for the NHS in England. The Trust is 'reimbursed' 50% by Lewisham CCG for every unpaid invoice reported to the Home Office (ie half of the inflated 150% cost invoiced). This money is funding held back by the CCG from the annual allocated health budget and used to enforce this cruel policy. The process actively encourages Trusts to report non-payers to the Home Office.

OUR NHS VALUES

NHS workers did not choose to work in health care in order to deprive sick people of receiving care and this policy puts pressure on health workers to implement a very cruel policy. As Nye Bevan, founder of the NHS, stated in 1948: 'No society can legitimately call itself civilised if a sick person is denied medical aid because of lack of means'.

NHS staff do not want to be border guards. This policy conflicts with NHS staff's duty of care towards the population of Lewisham.

The British Medical Association, the Association of Medical Royal Colleges and the Royal College of Midwives have urged ministers to suspend regulations that force hospitals to charge overseas visitors upfront for NHS care. They have voiced particular concern about pregnant women being denied free care and children missing out on treatment for life or death illnesses.

Mistaken judgements are made regarding eligibility for NHS care - as in the Windrush scandal - and many lives are put at risk due to this unfair charge. Immigration laws are very complex and there is a massive backlog of applications for legal status.

NHS staff have not had sufficient training about these charges. Staff are being used unwittingly to implement the charges without fully understanding the implications of the difficult judgements involved about whether treatment is urgent or not, and complex issues about the legal status of patients and their rights. This moral dilemma about charging for health care in Lewisham and England presents an unavoidable source of stress for NHS workers and undermines staff morale.

The Save Lewisham Hospital Campaign has been talking to Lewisham & Greenwich NHS Trust about this issue and we thank them for listening and responding to us. In its internal discussions in response to our meetings the Trust has informed us that it has agreed to void invoices for those women who have experienced adverse perinatal loss or outcome and to review its posters, communications and website information for pregnant women.

We know that government policy is the source of this policy but we are asking the Trust to raise health, safeguarding and moral issues connected to this policy with NHS England, and to do what it can to offset this policy.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

- * Find out what policies the Trust has in order to safeguard children, pregnant women and vulnerable adults from the consequences of this unfair and cruel charge
- * Write to your MP, local Mayor and Councillors asking them to back the campaign to end the hostile environment
- * Talk to your colleagues about this charge so that they are informed. Challenge anti-migrant sentiments
- * Contact your professional body/union etc to find out what they are doing about migrant health charges
- * Keep informed by following the Save Lewisham Hospital Campaign on Facebook or www.savelewishamhospital.com
- * Attend local meetings organised by SLHC and help in the fight to oppose these charges and to protect our NHS

Save Lewisham Hospital Campaign www.savelewishamhospital.com/migrant-nhs-charges/

Facebook @savelewishamhospital **Patients Not Passports** <https://patientsnotpassports.co.uk/>

Docs Not Cops www.docsnotcops.co.uk/

Medact www.medact.org/project/migration-health/

Maternity Action <https://maternityaction.org.uk/charging-for-nhs-maternity-care/>

Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants www.icwi.org.uk/