

HEALTH EMERGENCY

The Health Watchdog

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PRESS RELEASE

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Primary Care experts expose flimsy basis of London A&E cuts

As few as one in ten, and no more than 30 percent of patients attending hospital Accident and Emergency departments could be classified as needing only primary care, according to a new report.

This proportion is HALF the level assumed by health chiefs in NHS London, and far lower than many NHS managers have assumed. It strikes to the very heart of controversial proposals for the reconfiguration of hospital services that are currently being rolled out by NHS London and by Strategic Health Authorities across the country.

Primary Care and Emergency Departments by the Primary Care Foundation, was commissioned by the Department of Health, and published today (March 5): it investigated the use of GPs and primary care professionals in hospital Accident and Emergency departments.

One of the key assertions of the "Strategic Planning Guidance" issued to Primary Care Trusts last year by NHS London is for "60% of A&E activity to shift to "polysystems". This figure, published last year, without any supporting evidence, was itself a significant increase from the assumption in Lord Darzi's 2007 report on London, which looked to divert 50% of the less serious A&E cases to primary care and "polyclinics". On this basis up to a dozen A&E departments across the capital face possible downgrading to "Urgent Care Centres" or the loss of work to polyclinics.

Another key NHS London assertion, underpinning current plans to reshape healthcare in the capital, has been that delivering these services in "polysystems" will both enhance patient care and cut costs. That's why they see these policies as contributing to "efficiency savings" that would help NHS London bridge the yawning gap between frozen NHS budgets and growing demand for health care in the next few years, estimated at £5.1 billion in London by 2017.

But both of these assertions are refuted by the Primary Care Foundation's 102-page report, which

- specifically takes issue with "widespread assumptions that up to 60% of patients could be diverted to GPs or primary care nurses", and argues that the real figure is as low as 10-30%. (page 5)
- found no evidence that providing primary care in Emergency Departments "could tackle rising costs or help to avoid unnecessary admissions." The report authors argue that: "Cost benefits may exist, but the evidence is weak" (page 8)

The findings are relevant, because the report was commissioned by the Department of Health with a specific brief to: “provide a viable estimate of the number of patients who attend emergency department with conditions that could be dealt with elsewhere in primary care” (page 4).

LHE Information Director Dr John Lister said:

“This devastating new report shoots plans for A&E closures and hospital rationalisation in London and in many other towns and cities out of the trees.

“It is clear that diverting the least serious A&E cases away from hospital A&E departments would affect less than half the number of cases that managers had assumed – and that little or no money would be saved.

“This document means that every plan to scale back A&E services to “Urgent Care Centres” or polyclinic level needs to be torn up and revised. NHS London needs to go back to the drawing board.

“The report should immediately be used by every MP and councillor seeking to defend local hospital services against half-baked, cash-driven plans to run them down.

“It also raises the question of where the 60% figure touted by NHS London came from in the first place.

“It makes it even more urgent that NHS London be called upon to publish the secret McKinsey document which is the basis of their proposals for cutbacks, to show what evidence, if any, they ever had for their assumptions on switching services away from existing, well-known and popular local hospitals to a network of expensive and untried polyclinics which have yet to be built.”

Note to editors

1. *Primary Care and Emergency Departments* is available at <http://www.primarycarefoundation.co.uk>
2. John Lister is available for comment on 07774 264112 or john.lister@virgin.net