

June 23rd 2014

# CCG Ignores Popular Petition

Stockport NHS commissioners are to open up some GP “enhanced” services to commercial competition despite receiving a 3,600-signature petition opposing their privatisation.

The process by which the Stockport Clinical Commissioning Group came to its decision was marked by an almost complete lack of information for the public. Some statements it made can be seen as misleading.

GP enhanced services mainly consist of tests for patients paid for by the CCG. Among these are tests for lung (spirometry) and for blood pressure over 24 hours.

When the petition promoted by Stockport NHS Watch was presented to the CCG on February 12, leading members of its Board voiced surprise, asserting that they had not even discussed the issue at that point. Their comments did not seem to fit with a statement previously issued via the CCG’s press office saying GPs’ enhanced services might have to be offered to the market because of the NHS’s competition rules.

For reasons arising from the restructuring of the NHS, a decision was required by the start of April. At the CCG’s March meeting the organisation’s chair, Jane Crombleholme said that the services would be “rolled over”, apparently meaning they would be unchanged for the time being. A statement endorsed by the CCG suggested that there would be some consultation over the future of the services but nothing more was heard of this.

A final decision was unexpectedly revealed at the CCG’s May meeting. Spirometry and 24-hour-blood pressure tests are to be offered to “any qualified provider” – a term that potentially includes both the surgeries already offering the tests and any other providers who are deemed capable of doing so. Other tests will continue to be offered only by GPs.

It is not yet known how interested commercial organisations will be in offering the blood pressure and lung tests in Stockport but there is now a danger that over time GPs’ share of this work will be whittled away.

Enhanced services were located in GPs’ surgeries to make them readily available. Patients will be the losers if competition from pharmacies undermines surgeries’ ability to offer testing economically. Many surgeries’ finances are on a knife edge.

The CCG’s decision to offer lung and blood pressure testing to the commercial market may arise from an interpretation of competition law. The two tests are not provided at every surgery, possibly placing them in a different category from other tests which are offered by all GPs.

The CCG is looking for a wider spread of providers of 24-hour blood pressure testing throughout the borough. Before the advent of competition law, that expansion could have been achieved by encouraging other surgeries to take on some of the work, perhaps in association with surgeries already doing it.

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A report in the GPs' magazine Pulse in May named Stockport as among only a minority of CCGs in England which are taking any GP enhanced services to the market. Stockport remains in a minority even if allowance is made for CCGs who said they might introduce competition for some enhanced services later.