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Local GPs Fear Bidding Mess

GPs in Stockport are worried that they will be forced into last-minute competition with the private sector to carry on providing some tests and other services to patients.

Across England local Clinical Commissioning Groups (NHS boards) have belatedly become aware that they could face challenges under competition law if they do not give private health companies a chance to bid for Local Enhanced Services, which up to now have been based in GP surgeries.

While a GP's basic contract is with NHS England centrally, the CCGs commission add-ons. This arrangement makes CCGs feel particularly vulnerable to accusations of conflict of interest; the CCGs are themselves led by GPs who provide Local Enhanced Services.

Last year competition law already appeared to be out of control in hospitals and community services. Now the dysfunctional market regime is threatening general practice.

New contracts for Locally Enhanced Services must be in place by April, but Stockport and many other CCGs have yet to decide whether they will be ordering competitive tendering.

GP surgeries will be at a disadvantage in any rushed competitions because, unlike the private sector, they lack experience of competitive tendering and the resources to carry it out. Time-consuming bureaucracy is involved.

The shop steward for Stockport's GPs, Dr David Gilbert, told Pulse magazine: "Our CCG is worried that they are having to put services out to tender, despite wanting to keep the money in general practice. Obviously we're not happy that the CCG is in this position."

Dr Viren Mehta, Stockport CCG's clinical director, confirmed to Pulse: "We're concerned that the competition regulations mean up to 40% of our Local Enhanced Services, including spirometry, ECG and 24-hour blood pressure monitoring, may have to be put out to tender."

Stockport CCG emphasises that it has not yet made a decision. Across England, Pulse could only find 23 CCGs to say they have decided what to do out of 211 CCGs in total. Of the 23, nine will put all or part of the Local Enhanced Services out to competition while the other 14 are resisting the pressure. They have possible legal defences but a challenge could be expensive to fight.

Dr Gilbert says that Local Enhanced Services make up between 10 and 15% of GP surgeries' incomes. Pulse estimates that Stockport's general practices between them could be seeing £389,000 going out of the door. For the patients, one consequence of some testing going private is that it may become less accessible.

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Pulse suggests that Lloyds Pharmacy's owners, Celesio UK, together with Boots and BUPA will be among private sector health companies bidding to take services away from general practice.