

March 24th 2013

Stepping Hill A & E still failing its key treatment target despite a year of criticism & escalating official intervention.

Governors of the Stockport Clinical Commissioning Group, which picks up most of Stepping Hill's A&E bill, were told at their March meeting that "February and March performance has continued to be consistently below the required level". The A&E's ongoing failure to reach its treatment target comes despite the NHS's regulator Monitor putting Stepping Hill on a red risk rating in January.

As well as demanding a shake-up in A&E, Monitor demanded improvements in governance of the Stepping Hill organisation, whose official title is the Stockport NHS Foundation Trust. The key target Stepping Hill is missing is treatment of 95% of A&E patients within four hours. In January Monitor said Stepping Hill had missed the goal in four of the last six quarters. It now appears that the failure has continued through the first three months of this year.

The Stockport Clinical Commissioning Group has been holding weekly meetings with Stepping Hill managers over the past year in an attempt to obtain improvements in A&E performance. Concern has also been repeatedly voiced by the North Derbyshire Clinical Commissioning Group which sends patients to Stepping Hill.

Missed targets in A&E are not unique to Stockport. Figures from Monitor show 32 out of 88 English hospital trusts with A&E failed the "95% in four hours" benchmark in the last three months of last year. However, this was seen mainly as a winter flu problem, whereas Stepping Hill's difficulties seem more long-term.

Dr Peter Carter, chief executive of the Royal College of Nursing, told the Guardian newspaper that missed targets in A&E were an "unsurprising insight into a system which is struggling to cope with fewer resources and rising demand, and it is patients who are suffering as a result."

Under the previous government, the A&E target was 98% to be treated in four hours. The coalition government relaxed the standard to 95% soon after coming into office.

Stepping Hill's statistics show one patient waiting in A&E for seven hours. But there is also some reassurance for anyone heading for A&E. Many patients are seen within an hour or so. The median (or mid point) time people wait to be seen for treatment usually ranges from an hour to an hour and a quarter.

The troubles in Stepping Hill's A&E have been a further blow to the hospital's previously positive reputation which was marred in 2011 by suspected deaths due to interference with saline drips. Eight deaths are still being investigated by the police.