

# Stepping Hill Threat

The status of Stepping Hill Hospital is in doubt following the publication of plans to create a two-tier system of hospitals across Greater Manchester. The reorganisation, entitled Healthier Together, is the subject of a controversial holiday-time consultation lasting until September 30.

The key element in the reorganisation is the upgrading of four or five out of 12 district hospitals to the rank of "Specialist" hospitals where surgery for patients with life-threatening conditions will be concentrated. The remaining hospitals will no longer carry out emergency A&E surgery and high-risk acute and general surgery but will still cater for the nine out of 10 A&E patients whose life is not in danger.

Healthier Together has been put together by Greater Manchester's 12 NHS commissioning groups with central NHS watching over their shoulders. Confusingly, the consultation documents weave together proposals for hospital surgery and a plan to move more care into the community.

Although the consultative documents are voluminous they fail to make clear that the Healthier Together changes exclude other specialist hospital services including treatment for heart failure, stroke, trauma, cancer, burns and transplantation. In a debate in Parliament the consultation was condemned as a shambles.

## **Too many deaths**

The two underlying arguments of Healthier Together are that Greater Manchester's hospitals are not up to standard and that there is no money for expected increases in demand for hospital care. The consultation documents estimate that below-standard care of dangerously ill patients costs the lives of at least 150 patients a year in Greater Manchester. There is a 50% difference in mortality rates (using crude figures) between some hospitals in the region.

Healthier Together identifies the crucial weakness of hospitals as a shortage of consultants, particularly for high-risk surgery. It is asserted that even if funds were available to pay more consultants, hospitals would be unable to recruit them because of a national shortage. Recruitment of nurses to work in emergency departments is also difficult.

With emergency and high-risk surgery concentrated in just four or five hospitals the required expansion in recruitment of consultants would be more achievable. "Single service" teams combining medics from specialist and general hospitals would make work in general hospitals more attractive for career-minded doctors. Extended cover by consultants is the aim in both tiers of hospitals.

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To keep within a 2% cut in hospital budgets, Healthier Together is planning shorter stays in hospitals for their (mainly frail, elderly) patients. Improved primary and community care may enable patients to leave hospital earlier or, even better, to not need hospitalisation in the first place. GPs' surgeries will be opened at weekends with a mission to take greater care of the chronically sick. Other initiatives will take services out of hospital and into the community. The net effect on hospitals across Greater Manchester will be that between 500 and 600 beds will become surplus to requirements.

## **Distant hospitals**

While improving the NHS in the community and surgeries will be widely welcomed, the shift to two tiers of hospitals is worrying on two main counts: some journeys to hospital will become considerably longer, while hospitals that lose high-risk surgery and intensive care could be starting on a process of decline.

Initial journeys to top-tier "specialist" hospitals will usually be by emergency ambulance, so it will be mainly patients' visitors facing a possible trek by public transport. However, a fifth of "elective" surgery is also high risk and some of these patients could also face a travel challenge.

Healthier Together is considering three possible top-tier hospitals to cater for Stockport residents: Stepping Hill itself, Wythenshawe or far-off Oldham. Oldham has already been promised top-tier status but neither Wythenshawe nor Stepping Hill may make the cut.

Stepping Hill faces an uphill battle. Its rival Wythenshawe has university status and already takes heart failure cases from Stockport. Stepping Hill has a troubled relationship with Stockport NHS Clinical Commissioning Group. Its A&E is unable to meet the national target of seeing 95% of its patients within four hours. Its strongest argument for "specialist" status is that it caters for parts of Derbyshire that would have impossibly long travel-to-hospital times to Wythenshawe or Oldham.

Deep within the hundreds of pages of Healthier Together's consultation documents is an indication of further changes that may await second-tier hospitals; maternity and some children's services could be moved to top-tier hospitals later.

A consultation questionnaire can be found on Healthier Together's website.