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NHS rationing putting hernia patients' lives at risk, say surgeons

Cuts have led to a doubling in numbers denied quick access to treatment, claims royal college

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Patients with hernia problems are being left in pain and at risk of needing emergency surgery, and even of death, because the NHS is increasingly rationing surgery to treat it.

The number of NHS bodies across England that are restricting access to inguinal hernia surgery has doubled since 2014 as a result of cost cutting, surgeons have warned.

Almost six in 10 (57%) NHS clinical commissioning groups (CCGs) “are denying patients quick access to the procedure”, claimed the Royal College of Surgeons (RCS) and the British Hernia Society.

That is up from the 29% of CCGs - which hold the NHS budget in local areas - which were found to have imposed limits on inguinal hernia surgical repair four years ago.

“It is an absolute disgrace that some patients have to demonstrate what could be a life-threatening complication of a hernia, which is one of the most straightforward surgical conditions to treat,” said Susan Hill, a senior vice-president of the RCS.

The findings are based on responses from CCGs to freedom of information requests the RCS submitted to all 195 of them, of which 186 replied.

They revealed that the policy adopted by 95 (52%) CCGs means that many thousands of patients - who are mainly men - have to be suffering pain or enough discomfort from an inguinal hernia so that it impedes their everyday activities or work before they are allowed to have surgery.

“Yet again we see more evidence of crucial treatments being rationed at a local level. Not only is this policy building up further financial pressures on the acute sector but asking men to wait longer and longer in pain and at serious risk of further complications is totally unacceptable,” said Jonathan Ashworth, the shadow health secretary.

He urged Matt Hancock, the new health and social care secretary, to intervene and ensure that those who need surgery get it without delay.

A groin hernia is usually caused by a weakness in people’s abdominal wall that leads to fatty tissue or part of their bowel protruding into the inguinal canal, producing pain. If left untreated, it can cause complications.

A new joint report from the RCS and BHA warned that CCGs’ policies towards the condition can lead to patients ending up at increased risk of inguinal hernia strangulation. It said: “Strangulated inguinal hernias are a medical emergency, and failure to access appropriate surgical treatment can, in some cases, lead to death.”

Dr Amanda Doyle, the chief clinical officer of NHS Blackpool CCG and co-chair of NHS Clinical Commissioners, which represents CCGs, admitted that financial pressures are prompting CCGs to withhold surgery.

“Unfortunately the NHS does not have unlimited resources and ensuring patients get the best possible care against a backdrop of spiralling demands, competing priorities and increasing financial pressures is one of the biggest issues CCGs face.

“On a daily basis, they are forced to make difficult decisions that balance the needs of the individual against those of their entire local population. As a result there are some tough choices that have to be made, which we appreciate can be difficult for some patients,” Doyle said.

NHS England recently announced plans to reduce patients’ access to 17 treatments - both surgery and medication - for different medical conditions as part of its efforts to balance its books. It also plans to “rapidly expand” its list of restricted treatments despite the £20bn extra Theresa May has promised it by 2023-24.

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