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PCTs consider alternative to homeopathic hospitals

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One of England's four homeopathic hospitals is at risk of closure because of primary care trusts' reluctance to refer patients outside the NHS mainstream. Other homeopathic hospitals are also facing severe financial problems

Kent PCT, which runs Tunbridge Wells Homeopathic Hospital and also refers the majority of patients, is consulting on whether to vet all referrals made by GPs to the hospital.

As part of cost-cutting measures the PCT announced at the end of last year, all referrals to the homeopathic hospital would be scrutinised by an individual treatments panel, which would decide whether or not the referral would go ahead.

Campaigners claim this would have meant many referrals being refused, and the subsequent slashing of resources could have resulted in its closure.

Following protests, Kent PCT has agreed to review its commissioning process for treatment at the hospital, and a decision is expected later in the spring.

The Royal London Homeopathic Hospital is also experiencing a severe cut in funding, following the cancellation of contracts by commissioning PCTs.

Contract terminated

Brent PCT has terminated its contract with the Royal London, and Hammersmith and Fulham PCT has 'signalled an intention to stop direct GP referrals'. It is reviewing its position, but the PCT expects GPs will have to ask for approval for any referral for homeopathic treatment. Other London PCTs are also considering their position and look likely to reduce referrals.

Royal London Homeopathic Hospital clinical director Peter Fisher said: 'A combination of bad press and financial turbulence in the NHS means we are seen as a soft target.'

'We are funded by lots of small contracts, and if the referrals don't come in, then we don't get the funding.'

He added: 'There is a collision here between PCTs' financial imperative and the willingness to adhere to patient choice.'

Dr Fisher said his hospital's trust, University College London Hospitals foundation trust, had been very supportive, and the financial position of the hospital is still unclear while PCTs decide on their approach in this financial year.

But the hospital is urging patients and supporters to write to their PCTs and MPs.

Dr Fisher accepted that if enough PCTs fail to fund referrals, the hospital may be forced to close.

British Homeopathic Association chief executive Sally Penrose said she was very concerned for the future of England's homeopathic hospitals.

'If PCTs are refusing to refer patients to a homeopathic hospital, or vetting their decision, the GPs' clinical judgement is being overruled, often by people who do not have a good understanding of what a homeopathic hospital can offer,' she said.

Graham Clews