Labour wants to make patients honour their duty to NHS

Anne Gulland London

Patients' groups have attacked proposals for patients to sign agreements with doctors to follow healthier lifestyles.

The proposals from the Labour party, which could be in the manifesto for the next general election, would see patients signing agreements to ensure that they quit smoking, lose weight, exercise more, or eat a healthier diet.

The document, *Improving Health and Social Care*, says: "Not only could this agreement set out clearly the standard of care the patient can expect to receive, but it would also remind the patient of the reciprocal nature of their relationship with their doctor. It would involve people in their own care, asking them to share the responsibility for their own health care and well being."

A Labour party spokesperson said: "It is not about restricting treatment or making treatment conditions, as the document clearly explains. What we are consulting on is setting out clearly what you can

expect as a patient in the NHS. We also want to set out the responsibilities people would have, for example not to abuse NHS staff or make hoax 999 calls."

The document said the agreement would "bind" patients into "honouring their duty to the health service, putting the relationship onto a statutory footing."

However, patients' groups have rounded on the proposals. Claire Rayner, president of the Patients Association, called it "political manipulation of the nastiest kind."

The former agony aunt added: "I find it repellent, and no patient of any sense is going to fall for it. Let's have a bit of intelligent dialogue on this, not this finger wagging, contract making nonsense. It just won't work."

A spokeswoman for the antismoking organisation ASH said that forcing people to adopt a healthier lifestyle would not work: "Nicotine is so addictive that it's easy for people to find an excuse to go back to smoking."

Experts issue guidelines for treating childhood brain injury

Janice Hopkins Tanne
New York

Good treatment of brain injuries sustained by children can make the difference between full recovery and lifelong disability or death. Now the first guidelines for the best treatment of brain injury have been issued by a team of US experts.

The guidelines say that children with severe brain injury are more likely to survive in a paediatric trauma centre or in an adult trauma centre that is also qualified to care for children. The child's cardiovascular and respiratory systems must be stabilised in the field, during transfer, and in the hospital. Doctors should make sure that the child's oxygen level and blood pressure do not fall too low.

However, children must also be monitored for swelling of the brain, which is common in severe brain injury. If swelling occurs, then pressure within the skull must be lowered, by such methods as elevating the head of the bed, by draining cerebrospinal fluid, or by using mannitol, hypertonic saline, or barbiturates.

The guidelines are being published simultaneously in three medical journals (Pediatric Critical Care Medicine 2003;4(suppl):S1-175; Critical Care Medicine 2003;31(suppl):S417-91; Trauma 2003;54(suppl):S235-310).

Tories propose a "patient's passport" for use in NHS or private sector

Owen Dyer London

The UK's Conservative party has unveiled the fundamentals of its new health policy in a consultation document, claiming that its policy will promote choice and cut bureaucracy. The document invites comments from "those involved in the provision and organisation of health care" until 1 September.

Tory health planners say their ideas are drawn from extensive study of the health systems of other countries, notably Australia, Germany, Sweden, New Zealand, France, Ireland, Denmark, Switzerland, the Netherlands, Spain, Turkey, and Finland.

At the heart of the new policy is the "patient's passport," similar to voucher schemes mooted by previous Conservative governments.

Hospitals would not have fixed budgets or targets but would be paid set tariffs for each patient's particular treatment. Patients who moved to another hospital would take the funding with them.

The Tories argue that the current system penalises patients who seek private care, because they receive no credit for the tax money they contribute to the health system. Private patients should be encouraged, say Conservative planners, because they relieve pressure on the NHS by going elsewhere. The plan envisages allowing patients to use their passport to meet part of the cost of private health care.

This part of the scheme would have to be phased in slowly, say the Tories, as the private capacity does not yet exist to meet the extra demand

that would be generated by government subsidy of private patients' bills. The proportion of the full tariff that would be available to private patients has not been decided, though the consultation paper mentions the 60% figure used in Finland.

The Tories also promised to abolish "star ratings" tables and centrally set performance targets, which they say lead to "unethical" reshuffling of waiting lists on the basis of criteria other than clinical need.

Shadow health secretary Dr Liam Fox said, "It is now obvious that, however much money is thrown at the current system, it will never produce the quality of health care many of our European neighbours take for granted."

The consultation document, *Setting Patients Free*, is available at www.conservatives.com/