Watchdog brands two thirds of NHS trusts as “fair” or “weak”

Adrian O'Dowd *London*

Many staff working in the NHS in England will feel under attack this week after publication of the first and highly critical annual “health check” by the NHS standards watchdog.

The Healthcare Commission was about to publish its health check as the *BMJ* went to press. The report presents the most comprehensive assessment ever of NHS performance and will give a more detailed picture than the previous star rating system.

The NHS needs to “raise its game,” concludes the report, which rated 570 NHS trusts in England on a four point scale of “excellent,” “good,” “fair,” or “weak.”

Only 4% of all trusts got the highest rating of excellent for quality of services, while 30%

were rated as good. This meant that two thirds of trusts (66%) were rated fair or weak on quality.

Acute and specialist trusts performed best, with over half (54%) of trusts getting an excellent or good rating. Primary care trusts performed least well, with 78% rated as fair or weak.

Foundation trusts performed better than non-foundation trusts generally. In the regions the North had the highest percentage of trusts rated excellent or good, and London and the South East had the highest number getting a weak rating.

The rating for quality of services is based on:

- How well trusts meet 24 core standards in areas such as safety, clinical effectiveness, and focus on patients

- Existing targets to ensure that trusts meet basic levels of service
- New national targets to promote improvement in specific areas of health and health care
- The results of reviews of specific services, such as children’s services and drug management.

Ratings on use of resources were even more disappointing, with 84% of trusts being rated as fair or weak in this area. The commission said that many trusts failed to have adequate systems in place to control finances.

The commission says that immediate action now has to be taken at 33 trusts that were found to be weak on quality of services and on use of resources. Each of these trusts will have to

come up with an action plan with their strategic health authority.

Gary Needle, the head of the annual health check, said there was some good news in that waiting times for services that the public considered to be important—such as treatment in emergency departments and for cancer and heart disease—had been dramatically reduced, but he acknowledged that the results would have a negative effect on some staff.

“We are not interested in a blame culture, and the vast majority of NHS staff do a fantastic job day in, day out, in difficult circumstances.” PH

The health check is available at www.healthcarecommission.org.uk.

Stop “micromanaging” health care, says Tory leader

Lynn Eaton *London*

The leader of the Conservative party, David Cameron, wants to take the politics out of the management of the NHS by getting rid of centrally imposed and politically motivated targets.

That was his message to a meeting last Monday at a Conservative health policy forum hosted in London by the health policy think tank the King’s Fund.

“I believe that we need a new direction for the NHS, and that new direction should be based on our idea of social responsibility,” he said.

“That means moving away from the idea that government’s role is to micromanage the delivery of health care in Britain and moving towards greater professional responsibility for those who work in the NHS.”

The Labour government has interfered in professional judgments and diminished professional responsibility by second guessing the experts, he said. He said that spending in real terms on public services would rise under a Conservative government. He also wanted to see all trusts have greater freedom similar to that currently enjoyed by foundation trusts.

“We will allow professionals to make the important judgments about the best interests of their patients,” he said while outlining his party’s intention to introduce a bill that would change the role of central government in the NHS.

The government would, he said, remain accountable to the electorate for the total amount of money spent on the NHS, for

The Conservative party’s leader, David Cameron: “We will allow professionals to make the important judgments”

setting the statutory framework for improving public health, and for decisions about the scope of services offered by the NHS.

“But instead of imposing change insensitively from above, we want to work with doctors, nurses, ancillary staff, and administrators so we achieve sustainable, bottom-up improvement,” he said.

Nigel Edwards, director of

policy at the NHS Confederation, which represents over 90% of NHS organisations, responded by pointing to the need for accountability from the NHS.

He said, “NHS Confederation members ... recognise that they run a public service, spending almost £100bn [€150bn; \$190bn], and this means that there has to be strong accountability.” PH