

UK news

Rationing body will lose power to decide against new drugs

Sarah Boseley

The government's drug rationing body, Nice, is to be stripped of its power to turn down new medicines for use in the NHS, ending battles with patient groups, although there might be a postcode lottery for care instead.

The health secretary, Andrew Lansley, believes that Nice, the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence, should continue to write guidelines for doctors on the best treatments, but he will remove its power to ban the use of drugs it considers too expensive for the benefit they offer.

The move will be approved by the pharmaceutical industry, which has opposed Nice, and by patient groups, lobbying on specific diseases, sometimes with pharma funding. But the decision is likely to cause consternation among supporters of Nice, who warn of a return to the "postcode lottery", when some patients could get the drugs they wanted on the NHS but others could not.

Critics also point out that careful scrutiny of the cost-effectiveness of drugs is essential to keep bills down and ensure that NHS money is not spent on medicines with limited effect, to the detriment of other patients. "Real growth in the NHS will be about 0.5% in the next few years," said Alan Maynard, a health economist. "We're going to have rationing."



Off the line ... drug costs will be negotiated Alan Shoemaker/Getty Images

David Cameron's announcement of a £200m (\$320m) fund for new cancer drugs, "drove a coach and horses through Nice", said Maynard.

Lansley wants the decision on whether a patient should get a drug to be moved back to the patient's doctor. The local commissioning body will be asked to pay for it. The cost of the drug will be decided through a new value-based pricing system. The NHS will negotiate with the manufacturer on a price for new drugs, taking into account what other treatments are available and how innovative the company has been in producing the drug.

Lansley said reforming the way

medicines were paid for would ensure money was spent wisely. "We need a system that encourages the development of breakthrough drugs addressing areas of significant unmet need. We need a much closer link between the price the NHS pays and the value that a new medicine delivers, sending a powerful signal about the areas that the pharmaceutical industry should target for development."

Value-based pricing would replace the current complicated system that reimburses companies for the drugs they supply to the NHS. The industry may support the new system, as long as existing barriers are swept away.

Alcohol 'more dangerous than heroin'

Sarah Boseley

Alcohol is the most dangerous drug in the UK, beating heroin and crack cocaine into second and third place, according to an authoritative study that will reopen calls for the drugs classification system to be scrapped.

Led by the sacked government drugs adviser David Nutt, with colleagues from the breakaway Independent Scientific Committee on Drugs, the study says that if drugs were classified on the basis of the harm they do, alcohol would be class A, beside heroin and crack cocaine.

The study, published this week by the respected Lancet medical journal, will be seen as a challenge to the coalition government to take on the issue of the relative harms of legal and illegal drugs, which proved so politically damaging to Labour.

Nutt was sacked last year by the home secretary at the time, Alan Johnson, for challenging ministers' refusal to take the advice of the official Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs, which he chaired. The committee wanted cannabis to remain a class C drug and for ecstasy to be downgraded from class A, arguing that they were less harmful than other drugs. Nutt claimed scientific evidence was overruled for political reasons.

The paper updates a study by Nutt and others in 2007, which was also published by the Lancet and suggested that legally available alcohol and tobacco were more dangerous than cannabis and LSD.

The study offers a more complex analysis that addresses the 2007 criticisms. It examines nine categories of harm that drugs can do to the individual "from death to damage to mental

functioning and loss of relationships" and seven types of harm to others. The maximum possible score was 100 and the minimum zero. Overall, alcohol scored 72, against 55 for heroin and 54 for crack. The most dangerous drugs to their users were heroin, crack and then crystal meth. The most harmful to others were alcohol, heroin and crack in that order.

Nutt said: "The Misuse of Drugs Act is past its sell-by date and needs to be redone. We need to rethink how we deal with drugs in the light of these new findings."

The other drugs examined ranked: crystal meth (33), cocaine (27), tobacco (26), amphetamine/speed (23), cannabis (20), GHB (18), benzodiazepines (15), ketamine (15), methadone (13), butane (10), qat (9), ecstasy (9), anabolic steroids (9), LSD (7), buprenorphine (6) and magic mushrooms (5).

News in brief

● The head of MI6 has said it declines to pass on information about people to foreign countries if it means torture might be used, even though "terrorist activity" could be the result. Sir John Sawers, responding to allegations of collusion in torture by security and intelligence agencies, said the risk of abuse threw up "real, constant, operational dilemmas". Sawers, in the first public speech by a serving head of MI6, said: "Torture is illegal and abhorrent under any circumstances, and we have nothing whatsoever to do with it."

● Ofsted says that official reviews into deaths or serious injuries of abused and neglected children are still finding that the professionals charged with protecting them fail to do their jobs properly. An Ofsted report judged that fewer than half of the serious case reviews were better than adequate, and 16% were inadequate.

● The Local Government Association has warned of a potential crisis in adult social care, with home care for the elderly and disabled being withdrawn from thousands of vulnerable people as a result of cuts to council budgets.

● Kingfishers, newts, toads and ladybirds survived last winter's cold snap, despite fears the freeze could reduce wildlife in 2010, said British Waterways. Mark Robinson,



Natural survivor ... the kingfisher

national ecology manager, said: "I'm delighted that we've had so many records of kingfishers from across the country. The results show the resilience of nature."

● Prisoners are to get the right to vote as the government is poised to throw in the towel in a long-running legal tussle with the European court of human rights. It is understood the coalition is ready to change the law to remove the automatic voting ban on inmates of British jails.