

NHS patients left in limbo

Patients who opt to have their NHS operations carried out by private hospitals are facing a battle to get further treatment if their surgery goes wrong.

Since April 2003, the government has sent some NHS patients to Independent Sector Treatment Centres (ISTCs) to cut waiting lists. Cataract and orthopaedic, such as knee and hip replacements, operations are most likely to be done privately because historically these have long waits.

But contracts with private hospitals often allow for only one follow-up. Those with complications after surgery are the victims of a 'ping-pong policy' as both the NHS and the private hospital believe the other should offer follow-up care.

The practice is particularly worrying as there's some evidence that outcomes in ISTCs aren't as good as in most NHS units.

NHS orthopaedic surgeon Gordon Bannister has found that reoperation rates are ten times higher at his local private centre than at his own hospital.

His audit of nearby ISTC, Cheltenham & Gloucester Nuffield Hospital, revealed that 12 per cent of patients having hip replacement surgery needed another operation within a year. More than 10 per cent of knee replacement patients had to go under the knife again.

Rates at Mr Bannister's own hospital, the Avon orthopaedic centre, are lower – just 0.7 per cent of hip patients and 1 per cent of knee patients need another operation.

He said: 'It's a disaster. Some patients are left crippled and won't be able to enjoy their retirement. Patients should know the revision rates before they opt to have their care at a private centre.'

At the moment, patients who are given the option of quicker treatment aren't aware upfront of the likely success of their surgery.

Meanwhile, GPs have told us they're confused about where to send patients who develop problems after private treatment on the NHS.

A GP from Derbyshire said his patient opted for a quicker knee replacement in 2004: 'Immediately after the operation, it was clear that all was not well. The private hospital told him it was "early days" and he was discharged after the first and only follow-up. I ended up in the ridiculous situation where I couldn't refer him to our own orthopaedic service, as the joint replacement hadn't been done by them, and I couldn't refer him back to the private service because there wasn't a contract for them to see patients more than once post-operatively.'

Now MPs are looking at ISTCs and asking what plans are made for follow-ups. And the National Audit Office is conducting a study into independent sector provision, including revision rates.

The Department of Health said: 'The independent sector provider is contractually responsible for the follow-up care or any complications of the patients they treat.'

ACTION POINT

If you're offered private treatment, ask about potential complications and revision rates.

Surgeon Gordon Bannister found reoperation rates were higher at his local private hospital than on the NHS

'The private hospital told him it was "early days". He was discharged after the first and only follow-up'

GP, Derbyshire