

## Fear for Deaf patients in health shake-up



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Government plans to pass a big chunk of the NHS budget to GPs could spell disaster for Deaf patients, warns a charity today.

SignHealth, the healthcare charity for deaf people, said the plans will leave Deaf patients even more isolated and ignored by the health service. Speaking during Deaf Awareness Week, charity Chief Executive, Steve Powell, said:

“Deaf people get a poor service from the NHS. The Deaf population is scattered across the country. In every area they are a minority group that is not big enough to matter to PCTs. If GPs are given budgets they will be responsible for even smaller areas – where Deaf patients will count for nothing.

“The Treasury wants to see safeguards put in place, so GPs are held accountable for the money. We want to see safeguards put in place to protect patient groups that will be squeezed and ignored by the proposed changes.

“If commissioners have 1,000 or more Deaf patients they may spare them a thought. They might ensure there is an interpreting contract in place and that Deaf people do not have to rely on a telephone booking system. But if a GP thinks they might only have a dozen Deaf patients, will they make an effort?”

Before the move from Health Authorities to PCTs, health services in each area had a reasonable number of Deaf patients to consider. It became harder to argue the case for Deaf patients with the move to PCTs – as they had smaller populations. Moving to GP fundholding will be a further step into oblivion for Deaf people.

Unlike other ethnic minority groups, the Deaf community is spread out across the country. Some GP practices have a lot of patients from a particular ethnic background and can tailor services accordingly. For Deaf people this never happens.

SignHealth is working with the Department of Health to improve services for Deaf people. However, Steve Powell commented, “Guidance and recommendations are fine. But what counts is responsibility. If GPs are going to be given 80% of the NHS budget, they need to be given the responsibility to go with it. That means the responsibility to treat Deaf people equally, and that means changing their services and systems.”

### Notes to Editors

1. There are approximately 70,000 Deaf people in the UK whose first language is British Sign Language. Few health services provide a BSL/English interpreter or are accessible to Deaf patients.