

Hospitals attacked over £32m profits from parking fees

By Alastair Jamieson

HOSPITAL trusts are making annual profits of more than £1 million by charging patients and visitors to use their car parks, an investigation has found.

Across the NHS in England, total profits from parking rose by 14 per cent last year, to about £32 million. The increase came after two trusts – West Hertfordshire, and Luton and Dunstable – introduced minimum charges of £4.

The charges were condemned as “outrageous” by the Patients Association, which urged the Coalition to make hospital parking free in England, as it is in Scotland and Wales.

It also emerged that trusts issued 109,000 parking fines last year, earning £874,300. London’s Imperial College NHS Trust alone issued fines totalling £110,000. Some 1,300 drivers were clamped – 651 of them at one trust, St George’s in Tooting, south London.

Some of the trusts with the highest profit have been condemned for poor patient care. Worcestershire Acute Hospitals, one of four trusts making more than £1 million, apologised last week for leaving patients so dehydrated that doctors had to prescribe water.

The other three trusts making more than £1 million were Sheffield Teaching Hospitals, South London Healthcare and Southampton University Hospitals. Michelle Mitchell, charity director at Age UK, said: “Many older people and their families rely on their car to attend hospital. Hospitals must not make car parking charges an unreasonable barrier to getting treatment.”

Katherine Murphy, chief executive of the Patients Association, said: “It is outrageous that some hospitals are charging sick people so much.”

On average, two hours’ hospital parking costs £2.29 – 60 per cent higher than the average paid by shoppers at council car parks. Half of trusts levy a minimum charge, with no free parking except for key groups such as cancer patients.

The profit figures are based on a Freedom of Information request to England’s 175 acute hospital trusts. Three quarters replied, and nationwide totals were extrapolated. Most said they only broke even on parking and six made a loss.

The total paid has risen from £111 million in 2007/08 to about £149 million in 2010/11.

Seven trusts made more than £2 million in revenue last year, including Sheffield Teaching Hospitals, which collected £2.8 million.

Those making the biggest profit were mostly foundation trusts, which operate like businesses and will become the template for all hospitals under NHS reforms.

Kevin O'Regan, services director at Sheffield Teaching Hospitals, said: "All surplus income from car parks is always reinvested in NHS services here in Sheffield. We have not increased car parking charges for two years."

The Royal Free Hampstead said its charges – the highest at £6 for two hours – reflected "the need to deter shoppers".

Luton and Dunstable said it raised charges "with reluctance". West Hertfordshire said: "We have to make difficult decisions regarding how we spend our constrained resources."

St George's Healthcare NHS Trust said most of the cars it clamped were owned by staff.

The Department of Health said: "NHS organisations should work with their local communities to set appropriate policies."