

LETTERS

ALLOCATION OF NHS RESOURCES

Resources must be used to reduce inequalities

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Andrew Lansley's pronouncement that age, not poverty, is the principal determinant of healthcare demand is apparently intended to "test the water" for an age only proposal for NHS resource allocation.¹ That the crude prevalence of some diseases is higher in more affluent areas (with older populations) than in more deprived areas is taken to indicate greater demand for healthcare resources.²

However, the crude prevalence of single diseases based on register data is not a good indicator of overall morbidity or demand for healthcare. It does not take into account higher levels of comorbidities, under-diagnosis, and under-treatment in deprived areas. The proportion of people reporting at least one health problem lasting more than a year is highest in Merseyside (44%) and the north east (43%), and lowest in London (32%) and the south east (38%).³ So even without age adjustment the burden of ill health on this measure is still higher in poorer northern areas than in affluent southern areas.

Future demand for healthcare may well be lower in deprived areas than in affluent areas. As inequalities in life expectancy increase, poor people are more likely to die before they can take advantage of medical interventions that improve the quality of

life in old age, while in more affluent areas, because of better life chances, people live long enough to benefit from them. However, this does not indicate greater need in affluent areas: demand is not the same as need. Rather than focusing on demand, fair resource allocation must reflect the need for NHS services, and so achieve greater health benefits in deprived areas.

Competing interests: BB is a consultant in public health employed by NHS Blackburn with Darwen.

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- 1 Hawkes N. Allocation of NHS resources: are some patients more equal than others? *BMJ* 2012;344:e3362. (15 May.)
- 2 Asthana S. Lansley is right to say that age trumps poverty. *Health Serv J* 2012 May 17. www.hsj.co.uk/opinion/columnists/lansley-is-right-to-say-that-age-trumps-poverty/5044697.article.
- 3 Economic and Social Data Service. Quarterly labour force survey, October-December 2011. Variable lnglim: have health problems lasting more than 1 year, integer weights. <http://nesstar.esds.ac.uk/webview/>.

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