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Cite this as: *BMJ* 2023;380:p630

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1136/bmj.p630>

Published: 22 March 2023

## USER FEES FOR NHS PRIMARY CARE IN ENGLAND

### Supermarket plastic bags and NHS demand management

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The NHS is struggling and lurching from one crisis to another because it is underfunded compared with its peers in the western world.<sup>1</sup> Demand in the NHS is currently managed indiscriminately and haphazardly through scarcity of GP appointments, long emergency department waiting times, delays in scanning, and long waiting lists for surgery.

The NHS, which is free at point of access, is a noble endeavour.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, we shouldn't rule out using behavioural measures for demand management if vulnerable people could be protected. This is because things that are free at the point of delivery tend to be overused. Supermarket plastic bags are a good case in point: a nominal 5p charge remarkably reduced the number of single use plastic carrier bags used from around 140 a year to just 4 for an average household.<sup>3</sup> Contrast the 5p charge with the average weekly family spending of nearly £70 on food and non-alcoholic drinks in the United Kingdom.<sup>4</sup> It may be similarly possible to reduce NHS demand to some extent using nominal charges.

A dispassionate look at arguments needs real world data.<sup>2</sup> A trial of nominal access charges, in one region of the country, would provide data for making evidence based decisions rather than relying on political and ideological dogma. The single most important argument against access charges is that removing the political stigma around the principle of free at the point of access could turn out to be the thin end of the wedge for the viability of the NHS, with vulnerable people and those most in need at risk.

On the other hand, nominal access charges could have unintended benefits in addition to reducing NHS demand, such as reducing health passivity and promoting patient empowerment.

Competing interests: None declared.

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- 2 Majeed A. Let's look dispassionately at the arguments for and against user fees for NHS primary care in England. *BMJ* 2023;380. doi: 10.1136/bmj.p303 pmid: 36787914
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- 4 Office for National Statistics. Family spending in the UK. 18 Jul 2022. <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/personalandhouseholdfinances/expenditure/bulletins/familyspendingintheuk/april2020tomarch2021>