

LETTERS

OPEN LETTER

An open letter to Simon Stevens, NHS chief executive, and Alistair Burns, national clinical lead for dementia

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We are writing to voice serious concerns regarding the new dementia identification scheme for GPs, whereby English GPs are to be paid £55 (€70; \$88) for each additional diagnosis of dementia made before the end of March.

Helping people affected by dementia to achieve a diagnosis is a worthwhile goal, but the means of achieving this must have a sound ethical basis. The introduction of a financial incentive to the making of a diagnosis has broken new ground in the national GP contract and set a dangerous precedent that needs to be urgently reconsidered. The diagnostic process is unique

in the doctor-patient relationship because the patient has to trust the doctor's judgment. It is extremely difficult for patients to challenge their diagnosis; they are unable to "opt out" or be "exception reported" from a diagnostic label as they are with other incentive schemes, such as the Quality and Outcomes Framework, or a screening programme. There must, therefore, be absolute surety that doctors have no other motivation than the patient's best interests when they make a diagnosis. A direct financial payment like this undermines this confidence, and with it the basis of trust inherent in the doctor-patient relationship. Patients who may have dementia are particularly

vulnerable, owing to the nature of an illness that causes cognitive difficulties; and the diagnosis is a subjective, clinical assessment, meaning that misdiagnosis is a real possibility. To be given a diagnosis of dementia is challenging when the diagnosis is correct, but to receive such a label incorrectly can have truly tragic consequences.

This scheme may have good intentions, but it has crossed a line that should never be crossed and contravenes good medical practice. The reaction of the general public to the story is a demonstration of the widespread concern that the policy is unethical, and we ask for it to be withdrawn without delay.

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