



30th January 2006

SEXUAL HEALTH SET TO BE ONE OF TOP NHS PRIORITY

As the sexual health crisis in the UK continues to worsen, the Health Secretary, Patricia Hewitt, has now announced that sexual health services including access to sexual health clinics will be one of the top six priorities for government action in 2006/7.

In a document released by the Department of Health - "The NHS in England: The Operating framework for 2006/7", Patricia Hewitt outlines that sexual health will be one of the main focuses for the NHS, so that by 2008 everyone referred to a Genito-Urinary Medicine (GUM) clinic should be able to have an appointment within 48 hours.

Dr Simon Barton, President of the British Association for Sexual Health & HIV (BASHH) comments: *"We welcome the recognition that Britain's appalling sexual health needs to be a government priority. Improving sexual health services and tackling waiting times is an essential part of disease prevention, as failure to treat infections promptly – or at all, in some cases – means untreated patients remain sexually active in the community, and further increase the spread of STIs. We are glad that the funds and efforts will now reach the "shop floor" to help ensure that this issue is addressed promptly"*.

Last week, the Health Protection Agency (HPA) released figures that showed new diagnoses of HIV are still high in the UK, with 5,560 new cases reported for 2005 so far - these figures are expected to exceed 7,750 when late reports for the year come in. The poor state of the sexual health services in Britain was also highlighted in a BBC Panorama investigation in October 2005, which revealed that a quarter of UK sex health clinics cannot treat patients needing urgent help within the recommended 48 hours.

With the latest announcement made, it is hoped that money deemed essential by the Department of Health will also be appropriately allocated to frontline services, which often serve as the first port of call for many patients concerned about STIs and HIV.

Dr Simon Barton concludes: *GUM staff work under extreme pressure with difficulties faced due to inadequate resource and capacity to meet the local population's needs. The staff will be delighted to think that there is help coming, as increased capacity and better education is the only way to tackle the current and future situation.*"

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For further information contact Efe Abebe at Munro & Forster

Tel: 020 7815 3905 Email: efe.abebe@munroforster.com

Visit: www.bashh.org

Notes to Editor:

- For the full document "The NHS in England: The Operating framework for 2006/7" visit:
http://www.dh.gov.uk/PublicationsAndStatistics/PressReleases/PressReleasesNotices/fs/en?CONTENT_ID=4127249&chk=%2BnBex5
- For the latest HPA figures on new diagnosis of HIV in the UK, visit:
http://www.hpa.org.uk/hpa/news/articles/press_releases/2006/060126_HIV.htm
- For the full BBC Panorama survey results on access to GUM clinics visit:
<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/programmes/panorama/4335964.stm>