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CICRA endorses the removal of cap on number of doctors in Guernsey

The Channel Islands Competition and Regulatory Authorities' (CICRA's) report into primary healthcare in Guernsey has recommended that the limit on the number of doctors able to practice should be lifted.

The primary healthcare market review, commissioned by the Commerce and Employment Department, looked at specific aspects of primary healthcare - particularly out of hours (OOH) services and the provision of accident and emergency (A&E) services.

CICRA found that the limit on the number of GPs, (42), put in place prior to the introduction of The Competition (Guernsey) Ordinance 2012, may contravene the law and carried risks of higher prices and restriction of choice for users of the service.

CICRA chief executive, Michael Byrne, said: "Subject to appropriate standards, there seems no reason to limit the number of GPs any more than there is reason to limit the number of lawyers, plumbers or vets and we recommend the cap should be lifted as soon as feasible."

The review found that each practice sets its own charges for a standard 10-12 minute GP consultation and fees are typically £56-£58 - £12 of which is paid through a Social Security Department (SSD) funded grant.

CICRA surveyed around 1,000 patients, through Island Analysis, and 88% indicated the quality of their GP service was good or very good. While 55% indicated they were covered by some form of insurance cover, around 35% considered the cost of medical insurance was either prohibitive or not an option due to pre-existing medical conditions.

“There is evidence that the cost of GP visits may deter some islanders from seeking appointments when they need it,” Mr Byrne said.

“The Guernsey model of charging for appointments is a ‘pay-at-point of use’ approach. This is a complex area of policy with conflicting considerations. We trust the results of our work in this area will help inform States debate. Competition has a role however. Innovative ways of attracting patients in Jersey have been introduced that provide more choice to users.”

The GP practices jointly own and manage the Primary Care Company Ltd (PCCL) which provides the OOH GP service for the practices and, under contract with Health and Social Services (HSSD), provides the doctors who staff A&E.

The GP practices charge a fee to their patients for A&E services and PCCL receives a contract payment of £900,000. Total income from A&E services is therefore about £2.2 million (£1.3 million paid by patients and £900,000 from the States). The direct cost of providing the doctors employed by PCCL to staff the A&E service is about £500,000 plus the cost to the practices of the support provided by practice GPs.

“While the total income received by the three practices significantly exceeds the direct costs of providing the service it is not clear from the information available how the surplus is then used,” Mr Byrne said.

CICRA’s review highlighted that there was currently no service level agreement and no formal performance targets within the PCCL’s contract to provide A&E services between the States and PCCL and no published performance monitoring.

"As a minimum there should be clear and transparent reporting of performance in order to ensure the ongoing management of the contract by the States and to inform new negotiations or tenders for services," Mr Byrne said.

PCCL also provides a combined OOH service at PEH with the hospital providing space and supporting services free of charge. Charges for OOH appointments are two to three times the cost of standard appointments. The same States grant is made as for standard consultations.

The aggregate annual income from OOH services to practices in 2013 was £536,000 and reported direct costs for OOH GPs were around £650,000.

The practices estimate that up to one third of the OOH doctors' time is spent providing on-call support and back up for the A&E service.

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NOTES TO EDITORS:

All enquiries should be directed in writing to CICRA chief executive, Michael Byrne, in Guernsey at the Guernsey Competition and Regulatory Authority, Suites B1 & B2, Hirzel Court, St Peter Port, Guernsey GY1 2NH or in Jersey at the Jersey Competition Regulatory Authority, 2nd Floor, Salisbury House, 1 - 9 Union Street, St Helier, Jersey JE2 3RF. Alternatively email info@cicra.gg.

In line with CICRA's consultation policy, it intends to make responses to the consultation available on the CICRA website. Any material that is confidential should be put in a separate annex and clearly marked as such so that it may be kept confidential. CICRA regrets that it is not in a position to respond individually to the responses to this consultation.

About CICRA:

The Channel Islands Competition and Regulatory Authorities or 'CICRA' is the name given to the Jersey Competition Regulatory Authority (JCRA) and the Guernsey Competition and Regulatory Authority (GCRA) (formerly the Office of Utility Regulation). The JCRA was established under the Competition Regulatory Authority (Jersey) Law, 2001, and the GCRA was established under The Guernsey Competition and Regulatory Authority Ordinance, 2012. In Jersey, the telecoms and postal sectors are regulated by the JCRA, which is also responsible for administering and enforcing the Competition (Jersey) Law 2005. In Guernsey the telecoms, postal and electricity sectors are regulated by the GCRA, which is also responsible for the administration and enforcement of the Guernsey competition law since it came into force on 1 August 2012.

By working together and sharing resources and expertise between the islands, CICRA strives to ensure that consumers in all the Channel Islands receive best value, choice and access to high quality services.