



Health and Social Care Committee

House of Commons London SW1A 0AA

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From Rt Hon. Jeremy Hunt MP

Dame Cally Palmer
National Cancer Director, NHS England

Letter by email to England.mp@nhs.net

22 April 2020

Dear Cally

I hope you and your teams are well at this challenging time for all our health and care services.

I am writing to you with regards to concerns that have been raised with me about the availability of proton beam therapy for cancer patients in England. It is my understanding that the Christie hospital appears to have stopped accepting new referrals, and that planned provision at UCLH is not yet available. In the current climate, travel abroad for treatment is not possible.

I have been contacted by the Chief Medical Officer of the private Rutherford network, who is keen to gain approval to deliver these services for the NHS. He raised the particular case of an 18 year old who has been approved by the Proton Panel for treatment at the Christie, and who he believes could be treated quickly in Newport by the Rutherford network should NHS England give approval.

As you may well know, and has been reported in national media, Rutherford's CMO has recently co-authored a letter to the Minister for Health calling for updated NHS guidance to reflect private capacity to carry out this sort of treatment, bearing in mind the increased demand for anaesthesia and ventilators that the COVID-19 pandemic brings for NHS services.

I understand that previous conversations between the Rutherford network and NHS England about potential collaboration have not been fruitful. Given the growing concern about the long-term impact of COVID-19 treatment on core NHS and care services, I wonder whether you would consider looking into this matter? There may, of course, be very good clinical and/or economic reasons why this partnership has not been actively pursued, in which case I would find it extremely helpful to understand NHS England's perspective on this.

With thanks

Rt hon Jeremy Hunt MP
Chair, Health and Social Care Committee



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30 April 2020

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NHS England
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Rt hon Jeremy Hunt MP
Chair, Health and Social Care Committee
House of Commons
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Dear Jeremy,

Thank you for your letter of 22 April 2020, and for your thoughtful message about my colleagues, it is very much appreciated.

I would like to reassure you that the NHS Proton Beam Therapy (PBT) Centre at The Christie Hospital (TCH) is open, fully operational, treating patients and accepting referrals. I am in regular contact with their CEO. At no point have they stopped accepting referrals. The Centre is running at full, pre-Covid capacity and currently treating a full caseload.

As part of our response to COVID-19, NHS England and NHS Improvement has put in place a plan to manage access to PBT. The supporting guidance has been developed jointly by NHS England and NHS Improvement and the Children's Cancer and Leukaemia Group and reflects a broad clinical consensus of experts.

All adults are being treated normally. Children and Teenage and Young Adult patients are being treated according to risk and clinical benefit as assessed for each individual.

Decisions on referral are being made following discussions between patients and their consultants on the balance of the clinical benefits of PBT against the risks associated with travel and residence away from home. In some cases, local conventional photon-based treatment or surveillance is advised instead of PBT at this time.

In cases where active surveillance is advised, patients may still be treated with PBT later, as and when it is safe and appropriate to do so. If there is evidence of any progression, patients can be treated sooner with protons at TCH. The NHS has a plan to manage an increased workload, if this becomes necessary and as soon as it is safe to do so.

I am aware of the person you have referred to in your letter. This is a complex case and the pathway of care for this young person is being considered carefully by his NHS clinicians so that he has the best treatment plan in the current circumstances.

The NHS has been working closely with the independent sector to maintain essential and critical services since the start of the pandemic. The primary focus has been on tackling the main risk we have been facing which was, and is, demand for ventilated and oxygen dependent inpatient care. Our agreement with the independent sector therefore prioritised bed-based providers who could provide a wide and flexible range of services to accept transfers from the NHS. The partnership brought with it access to over 1,200 ventilators,

around 75% of which are being deployed to support services transferred from the NHS.

Cancer surgery has been a major beneficiary of the partnership. Management data suggests that on 23 April over 600 urgent cancer patients were being treated in independent sector facilities. Cancer Alliances are continuing to make use of our partnership with the independent sector as they develop and expand cancer surgery hubs across the country to maintain urgent and essential treatment and plan for recovery.

I hope this information is helpful.

With kind regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Cally". The script is cursive and fluid, with the 'C' being particularly large and stylized.

Dame Cally Palmer
National Cancer Director