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HEALTH SCOTLAND

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The Sunday Times May 22, 2005

Mobile phones to replace doctors in NHS review

SUE LEONARD, SCOTTISH HEALTH CORRESPONDENT

SUFFERERS of cancer, diabetes and asthma are to have their conditions monitored at home using mobile phones in a drive by health service managers to cut down hospital visits.

A review of the National Health Service in Scotland, to be published next week, will include a series of measures aimed at decentralising healthcare and bringing treatment closer to patients.

It is expected to recommend the retention of many local hospital services — contradicting the Scottish executive's policy of centralisation — as well as proposing that GP surgeries provide more specialist care.

The review by David Kerr, Rhodes professor of cancer therapeutics and clinical pharmacology at Oxford University, aims to set a blueprint for the direction of the health service over the next 20 years.

The 60-page document will focus on delivering care as locally as possible but will make controversial decisions about the future location of some specialist services.

Cancer experts are investigating the use of specially adapted mobile phones that allow patients to remain at home unless a hospital visit is absolutely necessary.

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Patients enter data about their condition into the phone which is linked to an automated alarm system, which triggers a nurse's bleeper if medical intervention is required.

Mobile phones have already been used to offer support to diabetics, reminding them to attend clinics. They could now also be used to monitor blood glucose levels. Asthmatics could use the technology to ensure their symptoms are monitored and to alert their GP if their condition deteriorates.

The closure and downgrading of local hospitals has been one of the most controversial issues since devolution. Rising anger across Scotland culminated earlier this year in mass demonstrations by campaigners at the Scottish parliament. Accident and emergency and maternity services have been among core services affected.

The Kerr report is expected to call for increased co-operation across health board areas. It will identify the services that can be delivered in smaller district hospitals and those that should should be offered in urban units, reigniting the debate over centralisation.

The report is also understood to recommend a reduction in specialised services such as neurosurgery and fewer 24-hour accident and emergency departments across the country.

Kerr is said to be keen to retain district general hospitals, particularly in rural areas.

Rural medicine is expected to be revived by the setting up of a network of doctors working across broad areas to ensure local treatment for patients wherever possible.

There will be a move to promote the role of "generalist" doctors and surgeons who could perform a range of procedures. Support from specialists elsewhere in Scotland will be provided via video links.

Much of Kerr's report will focus on the delivery of advice and treatment in the community with a greater role for community health teams.

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