

Concern over NHS drugs approval

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MPs have expressed serious concern over how the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (Nice) approves drugs for use on the NHS.

In a critical report, they said some methods used by Nice were outdated and some NHS trusts felt forced to fund Nice-appraised drugs at the expense of treatments for other patients.

The study by the Health Select Committee praised the "vital role" Nice plays in selecting drugs in difficult circumstances. But it said there were areas that needed attention, including setting up an independent body to determine the threshold at which treatments are deemed cost effective.

Nice has been heavily criticised by drug companies, campaigners and some academics for being too arbitrary in the way its cost threshold is used to evaluate drugs.

Some witnesses told the committee that the use of a threshold was leading to bias against treatments for long-term, chronic conditions. The study said: "The affordability of Nice guidance and the threshold it uses to decide whether a treatment is cost-effective is of serious concern. The threshold is not based on empirical research and is not directly related to the NHS budget. It seems to be higher than the threshold used by primary care trusts (PCTs) for treatments not assessed by Nice."

The committee stressed the need for a change in the law so that benefits to the wider society, including carers, were taken into account when evaluating drugs. Campaigners in last year's High Court battle over Alzheimer's medications argued that Nice failed to assess the benefits to carers.

The report said Nice also needed to review the use of older medicines that may no longer be cost effective. To date, reviews of two therapies are under way but far more needs to be done to encourage "disinvestment" in outdated treatments deemed to be a poor use of NHS cash.

Nice insists there are few treatments that have no benefit at all but the committee said Nice's responses to this question had been "disingenuous". The report said: "While few older treatments may do no good at all, many will not be cost-effective."

In relation to the evaluation process, the committee said the selection of topics was too limited and Nice did not always have access to a full range of research.

Experts were also not sufficiently well used and the publication of guidance was slow, it said.

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