

Press Release

Immediate Issue: 20 October 2016

**CUTS TO GLUTEN-FREE PRESCRIPTIONS BY SOMERSET CCG
IGNORE NICE QUALITY STANDARDS AND COULD COST THE NHS
MORE IN THE LONG RUN**

Coeliac UK is strongly opposing proposed cuts to gluten-free prescriptions for patients across Somerset from 1 December following the announcement by Somerset Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG).

Details of the proposed cuts were announced two days before a new National Institute of Health and Care Excellence (NICE) [quality standard on coeliac disease](#) was published which highlights that enabling access to gluten-free food on prescription aids adherence to the gluten-free diet. The Health and Social Care Act 2012 sets out a clear expectation that the care system should consider NICE quality standards in planning and delivering services.

Sarah Sleet, chief executive of Coeliac UK, the national charity for people with coeliac disease said: "As NICE quality standards are developed in line with clinical evidence and expert consensus, it is clear that the decision by Somerset CCG to remove vital front-line services, is being based on budget rather than patient need or clinical evidence. Cutting gluten-free prescribing exacerbates health inequalities, further disadvantaging the most vulnerable patients with coeliac disease."

Coeliac disease is a serious autoimmune condition caused by a reaction to gluten, a protein found in wheat, barley and rye. The charity believes any cuts to gluten-free prescriptions will leave vulnerable patients with coeliac disease without support which will affect their ability to stick to the gluten-free diet, which is the only treatment for the condition. The potential serious long term health complications of not maintaining a gluten-free diet include osteoporosis, infertility and, in some rare cases, small bowel cancer, conditions that could cost the NHS a lot more in the long run.

NICE has calculated that the cost of gluten-free food to the NHS equates to £194.24¹ per diagnosed patient per year, making it an extremely low cost treatment which supports their health and quality of life.

Last year Somerset Clinical Commissioning Group spent a total of £350,000 on prescribed gluten-free foods for all patients in the region. However, all patients of any age, are now highly likely to have their prescriptions cut from 1 December 2016 as the CCG proposes complete removal of the service.

The charity refutes the claim in the by the CCG which states:

'Gluten-free foods are now widely available in supermarkets, restaurants and shops. All major supermarkets also offer home delivery of food.'

“For someone medically diagnosed with coeliac disease there is no choice but to stick to a gluten-free diet, day in day out for life and so access to gluten-free staples is critical, and is not as easy as you might think. The expansion of Free From aisles in large supermarkets masks the reality of very patchy provision. Research published last year noted that gluten-free food in budget supermarkets stocked no gluten-free food, and that these stores tended to be frequented by people on lower incomes. Additionally, high prices make such products unaffordable for some.

Finally buying gluten-free products online will not be possible for those without online access and would simply add costs to an already expensive diet, as all retailers have delivery charges for low volume orders. All these issues put those most in need at risk – those on a limited budget or with limited mobility,” continued Ms Sleet.

Whilst gluten-free food staples such as pasta, are three to four times more expensive than comparable gluten-containing products, gram for gram, gluten-free bread is **six times** more expensive* than regular gluten containing bread in the supermarket. On top of this availability is limited in rural areas, discount supermarkets and small stores. Having access to gluten-free staple foods on prescription provides an essential level of support to individuals trying to keep to the gluten-free diet which is the only treatment for coeliac disease.

“Any reduction in the gluten-free prescription services for people with coeliac disease is being based on budgets rather than patient need or clinical evidence. The provision of gluten-free staple food on prescription is a vital element of the support offered to all patients by the NHS and it is essential to prevent long term damage to health,” continued Ms Sleet.

In England, prescriptions for gluten-free food are not free of charge unless someone already qualifies for free prescriptions. Currently 60% of CCGs across the country adhere to National Prescribing Guidelines, providing recommendations for GPs and policymakers on reasonable amounts of gluten-free staple foods such as bread, flour and pasta per patient per month.

Ends

¹ Based on NICE Guidance NG20 Appendix G: Full Health Economics Report, 2015 annual cost of £194.94 for 40 years, figures not adjusted for inflation. Typical age at diagnosis 30-35yrs, average age span in the UK 70-75yrs.

Notes to editor

- Coeliac disease is a serious illness where the body's immune system reacts to gluten found in food, making the body attack itself.
- 1 in 100 people in the UK has coeliac disease
- A wide range of case studies are available on request from Coeliac UK.
- Average time to diagnosis is 13 years.
- 1 in 4 people diagnosed with coeliac disease had previously been diagnosed with IBS.
- Gluten is a protein found in wheat (including spelt), rye and barley. Some people are also sensitive to oats. Obvious sources of gluten include breads, pastas, flours, cereals, cakes and biscuits. It is often used as an ingredient in many favourite foods such as fish fingers, sausages, gravies, sauces and soy sauce.
- Coeliac UK has a Helpline on 0333 332 2033 and further information can be found at www.coeliac.org.uk

* Comparative costs for gluten-free bread and gluten containing bread as of 20 October 2016

| Gluten-free loaf | Price per 100g | Price per loaf |
|---|----------------|----------------|
| Tesco-free from white sliced (400g) | £0.38 | £1.50 |
| Tesco-free from fresh bread (550g) (white or brown) | £0.36 | £2.00 |
| Asda free from white sliced bread (400g) | £0.38 | £1.50 |
| Sainsbury's free from sliced (400g) white or brown | £0.50 | £2.00 |

Compared to gluten containing

| Gluten containing loaf | Price per 100g | Price per loaf |
|--|----------------|----------------|
| Tesco everyday value bread (800g) (white or brown) | £0.05 | £0.36 |
| Tesco bread (800g) (white or brown) | £0.06 | £0.50 |
| Asda Baker's Selection (800g) white or brown | £0.06 | £0.50 |
| Asda chosen by you (800g) wholemeal | £0.09 | £0.75 |
| Sainsbury's basics bread (800g) white or brown | £0.05 | £0.40 |
| Sainsbury's bread (800g) white or brown | £0.06 | £0.45 |
| Waitrose essential (800g) white or brown | £0.06 | £0.45 |
| Waitrose bread (800g) sliced white bread | £0.13 | £1.00 |

Note: for Morrison and Waitrose customers there is not an own brand gluten-free version. Genius bread (gluten-free) is available at £2.70 for a 535g loaf (£0.51 per 100g) or Warburtons gluten-free is available at £3.00 for a 560g loaf (£0.54 per 100g)