

Press Release

Immediate Issue: 1 December 2016

Proposed cuts to gluten-free prescriptions by West Kent 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 local patients in West Kent, following the announcement of a consultation by NHS West Kent Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG).

Details of the proposed cuts were announced after a new National Institute of Health and Care Excellence (NICE) [quality standard on coeliac disease](#) was published which highlights that healthcare professionals should enable access to gluten-free food on prescription for those who may need support to help maintain 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 proposal by West Kent CCG to remove vital front-line services is being based on budget rather than patient need or clinical evidence. Cutting gluten-free prescribing will exacerbate health inequalities, so it is imperative that West Kent CCG continues to support the most vulnerable patients with coeliac disease.”

The charity refutes the claim in the consultation document which states:

‘A wide and expanding range of gluten-free foods is available from supermarkets and online.’

“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. Research¹ published last year noted that 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,” said 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* (see chart below) than regular gluten containing bread in the supermarket. 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.

“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.

NICE has calculated that the cost of gluten-free food to the NHS equates to £194.24² per diagnosed patient per year, making it an extremely low cost treatment that addresses potential health inequality in the management of coeliac disease due to the higher cost and limited availability of gluten-free food. Last year West Kent CCG spent around £130,000 on prescribed gluten-free foods for all patients in the region.

“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.

Coeliac UK is also concerned over this comment in the consultation document where it states:

‘There are a number of naturally gluten-free carbohydrates which are widely available and can be used instead of foods like bread and pasta. These include rice, potatoes and flour alternatives such as millet and corn flour’

“Simply switching to alternative carbohydrates such as rice and potatoes risks malnutrition with bread alone providing between 10 and 20% of our most important nutrients such as protein, calcium and iron but potatoes and rice only providing a fraction of this,” explained Ms Sleet.

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.

In England, prescriptions for gluten-free food are not free of charge unless someone already qualifies for free prescriptions.

The consultation was launched on 29 November at the CCG's Governing Body meeting and runs until the 29 January. A number of meetings are being held and an online survey can be completed at: www.surveymonkey.co.uk/r/WKglutenfree. The charity would like to encourage all those that might be affected to complete the questionnaire so that their opinions are heard.

Ends

¹ Burden, M., et al., (2015) Cost and availability of gluten-free food in the UK: in store and online. Postgraduate Medical Journal, 2015: p. postgradmedj-2015-133395

² 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 1 December 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	£0.38	£1.50
Sainsbury's free from brown sliced loaf (400g)	£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	£0.45
Asda Baker's Selection (800g) white or brown	£0.06	£0.45
Asda chosen by you (800g)	£0.09	£0.75

wholemeal		
Sainsbury's basics bread (800g) white or brown	£0.05	£0.36
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)