

Press release
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FOOD SUPPORT FAVOURED BY LEADING CLINICIANS FOR PATIENTS WITH COELIAC DISEASE

In an [article](#) published today, Wednesday 11 January 2017, the BMJ presents a 'head to head' argument over gluten-free prescribing in the NHS. Both contributors agree that patients with coeliac disease should receive support from the NHS to access gluten-free staple foods. What the article explores is the way that support is provided.

Matthew Kurien clinical lecturer in gastroenterology, Professor David Sanders, and Sarah Sleet, Chief Executive of Coeliac UK main case is for ensuring ongoing access gluten-free staple foods and highlight that removing prescriptions (which is the standard means of supply at present) unfairly discriminates against people with coeliac disease. They explain that: "targeting gluten-free food prescriptions may reduce costs in the short term but there will be long term costs in terms of patient outcomes" and points out that there is no other example in the NHS of a disease having its treatment costs cut by 50-100%.

On the other side of the argument, James Cave, a GP from Newbury, suggests an alternative would be a national voucher scheme or a personalised health budget for patients so they receive the difference between the cost of gluten-free products and the prescription.

Sarah Sleet stated: "Nobody in this article is denying the need for support for people with coeliac disease in accessing staple gluten-free foods such as breads and flours. In fact Dr Cave's argument is not with providing support but rather with the way the NHS goes about it. He believes prescriptions are an inefficient and unnecessarily expensive way of supplying these essential foods. We agree that other ways such as voucher schemes may provide a better solution all round and have supported trials of this approach. But we deeply object to healthcare commissioners who find it easier to cut services rather than put in place alternatives which will maintain some level of service to patients. Thankfully Dr Cave does not believe the patient should pay the price of poor procurement."

"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 in 2015 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 than regular gluten containing bread in the supermarket.

Ms Sleet continued: “People are feeling the negative impact of cuts and we know that the most vulnerable are going without food when they can’t afford to support their diet.” 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.

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

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