

Doctors unite to condemn

The GP

REPORT by chief reporter Will Green

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DACORUM'S GPs are in revolt.

All practices in the area have joined together to voice their 'deep concern' about the risks to patients from the cuts to local health services.

In an open letter the doctors say the cuts 'carry risks' because they do not have the resources to take up the slack from fewer hospital beds.

They are also furious at moves to further restrict their ability to refer patients to specialists for an expert opinion.

The unprecedented attack comes as West Herts Hospitals Trust is shown to be among 13 'bankrupt' trusts that it is claimed will never drag themselves out of debt.

At the same time a senior clergyman has added his voice to the chorus of dissent by calling on hospital chiefs to think again on A&E closures in Hertfordshire.

The GPs' letter to health chiefs is the first time family doctors in the borough have publicly come out against the cuts taking place and it follows a similar rebellion by retired hospital consultants.

The letter says: "Doctors in Dacorum are concerned by the increasing risks to patients caused by the planning panic that has gripped West Herts health services in recent months.

"There is deep concern about the potential risks to patient wellbeing resulting from the accelerated pace of local health service reconfiguration now being undertaken.

"The changes to Hemel Hospital carry risks since we do not have the infrastructure in place to reduce hospital admissions when beds are cut.

"We need to pause to consider novel ways of utilising the Hemel site before there are any moves to demolish or sell off the Hillfield Road buildings."

The letter was mooted at a meeting of Dacom, the body representing all 29 GP practices in the borough, on December 5 in Felden.

A draft copy was then sent out to all practices before being sent on to Anne Walker, chief executive of the two primary care trusts (PCTs) covering Hertfordshire.

It comes in response to the decision to centralise all emergency care at Watford General Hospital and most planned operations in St Albans, leaving Hemel Hempstead with a minor injuries unit and some diagnostic services.

The changes are taking place despite 82 per cent of people in a public consultation backing Hemel Hempstead as a

centre for operations.

Dr Tony Hall-Jones, who co-ordinated the letter, said: "Medically we can't sit here and let this happen because when the tragedies happen people will turn around and say: 'Why didn't the GPs stand up and say these are the risks?'"

"Patients are being subjected to these risks, not because of a conflict between treatments but purely because of the accelerated process of reconfiguration."

The local NHS is riddled with debt, with the hospital trust declaring an accumulated debt of £52.7million and the PCTs a predicted debt of £34million by the end of the financial year.

A form of accounting used in the NHS which punishes overspending trusts by cutting their budgets and forcing them to pay back overspends has been blamed for the hospital trust's woes.

Dr Hall-Jones said: "While I can sympathise with the trust's position I can't tolerate them blindly putting into place changes to the local NHS that will reduce the deficit at the expense of patients' interests.

"If we have a bad winter coupled with a flu pandemic, lives that would've been saved might be lost because patients can't be admitted to

the beds they require."

Last night GP anger was further fuelled by a PCT memo pressurising them to limit the number of consultant referrals they make to help reduce debts.

In a leaked note to The Gazette, The Local Medical Committee (LMC), which represents GPs, said it was 'deeply concerned' at the development and it 'feels that such restrictions undermine the speciality of general practice and represent a threat to patients' safety'.

Meanwhile, Bishop of St Albans Christopher Herbert has said that recent rail accidents in Herts and the Buncefield disaster had to be considered in planning health services. "What would the closure of some of the A&Es do to our arrangements to deal with a major incident?" he asked.

In a statement Hertfordshire Primary Care Trusts said: "We are committed to working closely with our GP colleagues and take the issues raised in this letter very seriously."

West Herts Hospitals Trust said: "Our plans to reconfigure services, separating out emergency from planned care and operations are all part of ensuring a sustainable future for the trust, delivering a balanced budget and the best possible patient care."



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GROW MORE: Will this gras

by Jonathan Matfin

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THE LARGEST grass roof in the UK could soon crop up on the Hemel Hempstead skyline if fresh plans for an indoor ski centre are given the go-ahead this week.

Plans by Hemel Ski Centre to replace its dry slopes off St Albans Hill with a 'snow-dome' were rejected by the council last year over the look of the new building's giant aluminium roof.

But tomorrow (Thursday), the centre will put fresh plans to the council for an indoor ski centre with a massive 'nature roof' covered in grass - potentially the largest of its kind in the country.

The revolutionary roof would help the new snow-dome blend into the Bennetts End horizon.

It would also help to insu-