Anger over hospital referral cap

Local health bosses are considering capping the number of patients that can be referred to hospital each week.

The news comes as many parts of the NHS are struggling with finances, but the Buckinghamshire health chiefs said it was aimed at improving patient care.

The primary care trusts - Wycombe, Vale of Aylesbury, and Chiltern and South Bucks - said the public had asked to be treated outside hospitals.

But GP leaders condemned the move as a "crude" cost-cutting measure.

One of trusts - the Vale of Aylesbury - is facing a £4.9m deficit this year.

The PCTs, which are in charge of commissioning local services from hospitals to GPs, have proposed having just 1,500 patients referred to local hospitals each week, the BBC's Today programme reported.

At the moment 2,000 patients are treated by hospital consultants.

"We know the public would prefer to be treated closer to home"

Bart Johnson, chief executive of the Chiltern and South Bucks PCT, said the move was being considered after a recent public consultation showed that people wanted to be treated nearer to home, and was not a reflection of the financial difficulties facing the NHS - one in four trusts ran up a deficit last year.

"We have a statutory duty to balance the books. But regardless of the financial position, we would still be doing this."

The move is in line with government policy. Ministers want to see more people, especially with long-term conditions, being treated in the community.

'Crude'

But the British Medical Association has called into question the...
decision to consider a cap.

Hamish Meldrum, chairman of the BMA's GPs committee, said it was a "crude short-term measure" to save money and was not in the interest of patients.

He added: "It may, in the long run, cost more money."

Dr David Tod, chief executive of the NHS Trusts' Association, said it was a considered measure as there had been an increase in hospital referrals recently.

"We know the public would prefer to be treated closer to home."

And the Department of Health said it was "good management" to have more people seen in the community.