

Dear Secretary of State,

We are writing to you to express our deep, shared concerns about the proposal to raise the qualifying age for free prescriptions from 60 to 66.

There is no doubt that it will have a lasting adverse impact on the 52% of 60-64 year olds with one or more long term conditions. Some will find the change affordable but significant numbers will not. The DHSC impact analysis highlights that these patients will find it harder to proactively manage their conditions, presenting in their local health service as they deteriorate.

The DHSC has estimated savings of £198-£257m p.a. for the NHS as a whole, a tiny fraction of the NHS £212.1bn budget for 2020/21. What's more, this estimate does not take into account the additional costs to local health services of having to address the more complex issues that will arise for people in this age group who will no longer feel able to afford their medication. These patients are more likely to live in more deprived communities, with services that are more overstretched and under-resourced than in more affluent areas. There are no specific measures suggested to direct the money saved by this proposal to support health systems in less favoured places. The proposed change seriously risks widening health inequalities at a time when the Government and the NHS are committed to narrowing them.

The age for exemption from prescription charges may have its origins in the State Pension age but its rationale today is that it meets a known health need. Most of us will live with one or more health conditions as we age and for many in their sixties this can mean needing to take medicines into the longer term, to preserve and protect their health for the future. The fact that the existing exemption helps to remove any potential barriers to achieving this is really important – just as significant, in fact, as the exemptions that help people on low incomes to afford their medicines. This is also why, in the longer term, we believe that prescriptions should be free for all.

At a time when it is inevitable that millions are going to be waiting long periods for elective surgery and other treatments, these changes risk compounding the NHS backlog by putting new barriers in the way of 60-65 year olds with lower incomes taking the medication they need to manage their conditions in the meantime.

For all these reasons we urge you to commit to retaining the prescription fee exemption for patients aged over 60.

We would be very happy to discuss these matters with you or with your advisers. Please ask your office to contact rosie.mckearney@ageuk.org.uk if you wish to pursue this.

Yours sincerely,

Caroline Abrahams, Charity Director, Age UK

Carla Jones, Chief Executive, Allergy UK

Sarah Baker, Interim CEO, Anaphylaxis Campaign

Sarah Woolnough, CEO, Asthma UK and the British Lung Foundation

Tony Thornburn OBE, Chairman, Behçet's UK

Sarah Mistry, Chief Executive, British Geriatrics Society

David Phizackerley, Deputy Editor, Drug and Therapeutics Bulletin, BMJ

Des Quinn, Chair, Fibromyalgia Action UK

John Hibbs, Founder and Chairman, The Hibbs Lupus Trust

Dr Susan Walsh, CEO, Immunodeficiency UK

John Palmer, Director of Policy and Communications, Independent Age

Paul Howard, Chief Executive, LUPUS UK

Angie Davidson, Campaign Director, Lupus Trust

Karen Walker, Chief Executive, Multiple System Atrophy Trust

Laura Cockram, Chair of Prescription Charges Coalition and Head of Policy and Campaigns at Parkinson's UK

Martyn Hooper MBE, Chair, Pernicious Anaemia Society

Martine Walmsley, Chair of Trustees, PSC Support

Mark Koziol, Chairman, Pharmacists' Defence Association

Professor Martin Marshall, Chair of Council, Royal College of General Practitioners

Thorrún Govind, Chair of the English Pharmacy Board, Royal Pharmaceutical Society

Sue Farrington, Chief Executive, Scleroderma & Raynaud's UK

Shwachman Diamond Syndrome UK

John James OBE, Chief Executive, Sickle Cell Society

Romaine Maharaj, Executive Director United Kingdom, Thalassaemia Society

Arlene Smith, Executive Officer, Turner Syndrome Support Society UK