

Money woes hit cancer patients, says charity

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Financial problems affect more than two-thirds of cancer patients, with some going without food because money is so tight, a charity has claimed.

A YouGov survey of 1,500 patients for Macmillan Cancer comes as the charity challenges the Welfare Reform Bill, being debated in the Lords this week.

Macmillan claims thousands could lose out because of proposed changes to the Employment and Support Allowance.

But the government said those who needed the benefit would still get it.

Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) claimants are divided into two categories - those undergoing treatment are in the "support group" and there is no time limit.

But those who are deemed able to perform "work-related activities" which might help them eventually return to work face means-testing after 12 months.

Anyone with savings over £16,000, or whose partner either works more than 24 hours or earns more than £149 a week, would lose all their ESA.

The Macmillan survey found 66% of the cancer patients who were surveyed had reported a rise in costs, because of factors such as hospital trips and increases in household expenses.

One in six (17%) of those who suffered financially were forced to cut back on everyday essentials such as buying food,

while 5% said they had skipped meals to save money, and 7% were scared of losing their home.

In addition, nearly a third (29%) of those financially affected have spent all or some of their savings, and 9% have had to borrow money.

Almost half those surveyed were anxious about their finances.

Expensive disease

Macmillan says the changes to ESA provision could mean 7,000 cancer patients will be up to £94 a week worse off. And it claims that, under another proposal, cancer patients needing immediate financial help to cover extra costs following their diagnosis will be forced to wait six months instead of three to get the Personal Independence Payment (PIP), which replaces Disability Living Allowance (DLA).

Ciaran Devane, chief executive of Macmillan Cancer Support, said: "Cancer is an expensive disease to live with, but this research shows just how close to the breadline many cancer patients really are.

"While we understand the benefits system is in need of reform, certain changes in the Welfare Reform Bill could have catastrophic effects on many families who are already struggling."

Macmillan wants the Bill amended so everyone eligible for ESA will receive it for as long as they need and that it is "unacceptable" that people could have to wait six months for their PIP.

But a spokeswoman for the Department of Work and Pensions said: "Recovering cancer patients who are assessed as still needing unconditional government support will be placed in the support group of ESA and will see no change to their benefit entitlement after 12 months. Nor will there be any change for those on income-related ESA.

"We have already made changes to ESA so that people in between courses of certain types of chemotherapy, as well as those receiving it, automatically receive unconditional support."

She said the changes to PIP were to align the definition of long-term disability with the Equality Act 2010, that if people had completed some of the necessary "qualifying period", that would count. and that the terminally ill would not be affected.

GAIL'S STORY

Gail was diagnosed with vulval cancer in February 2009.

She applied for the Employment and Support Allowance, but only received it from November 2009, as a paper was mislaid because of a move.

In early 2010, Gail was sent to the job centre. She said they tried to put her into work and on to a lower rate of ESA, and she had "hundreds of appointments".

She appealed and won in April 2011 but only after a six-month fight.

Gail, a single mum, says her two children went hungry and she fell behind on rent payments.

"It was very stressful and the doctor told me stress was non-healing.

"For a long time we had to go without. I couldn't buy clothes - and I'd lost a lot of weight - and we survived on basic food."

She's still behind on rent payments and has built up debt.

But she now has a part-time job, working with children who have special needs.

"Things are better now," she says.

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