

Scottish NHS Trust pays £30,000 to Catholic Church for last rites service

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It was revealed this week that a Scottish NHS trust is paying the Catholic Church £30,000 a year to provide "out-of-hours spiritual care", largely to ensure that dying patients receive the last rites.

The Edinburgh Secular Society condemned the deal, saying it found it strange that the "well-funded Catholic Church requires the tax-payers of Scotland to top up its coffers".

Garry McLelland, chair of the ESS said: "I would find it strange if the Catholic Church was to leave one of its members lying in hospital without providing a service because the state refuses to foot the bill".

NHS Lothian has entered into the "service level agreement" with the Archdiocese of St Andrews and Edinburgh. While the Church banks the money, members of the clergy receive £10 per week for their work. A previous arrangement, whereby a chaplain from the RC Church was employed at a salary of £56,000 a year was scrapped because of "poor on-call service".

Sandy Young, NHS Lothian's head of service for spiritual care and bereavement, said the health board focussed on meeting the "urgent and essential needs" of patients and their families at all times.

He added: "Over half of the out-of-hours urgent and essential referrals received in the last year were from Roman Catholics, for whom spiritual care often requires the presence of a priest at short notice. A 24/7 on-call system is in place to ensure this requirement is met".

Terry Sanderson, president of the National Secular Society, said: "The Church justifies this because it is an 'out-of-hours' service. Since when was a priest's duty to provide last rites a nine-to-five job? Would they refuse to turn out to a pensioner at death's door in his own home at midnight unless they received a fee?

"This kind of service has absolutely nothing to do with a hospital. It is entirely a matter between a priest and his congregant. There is no justification whatsoever for a cash-strapped body like the NHS to be paying tens of thousands of pounds for it. By all means call out a priest if it is important to the patient, but why pay his wages? That's the church's business.

"What next," Mr Sanderson asked, "the NHS being asked to repair the church organ or pay for repairs to the church roof? Where does this end? The Church should be ashamed of itself."

A spokesman for the Archdiocese of St Andrews and Edinburgh said its £30,000 fee for out-of-hours cover represented only 5% of the amount the health board spends on spiritual care annually. A report from NHS Lothian stated that funding for a Roman Catholic chaplain to be on the NHS payroll at £56,000 per annum had been scrapped because of "poor on-call RC service delivery".

The Archdiocese of St Andrews and Edinburgh said the paper "did not supply any evidence" to support the assertion.

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