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**Churches and religious organisations should fund their own presence in hospitals, says the National Secular Society (NSS), after it discovered that chaplaincy services are costing the National Health Service more than £32million. This would pay for around another 1,300 nurses or over 2,500 cleaning staff. Both are much-needed.**

Using the Freedom of Information Act, the NSS undertook its own research into the cost of chaplaincy services after the Government said it did not keep centralised figures on such spending.

“The headline figure only takes into account the salaries of the chaplains, it doesn’t take account of National Insurance contributions, pension payments, administration costs, office accommodation, training, the upkeep of chapels and prayer rooms,” said Terry Sanderson, president of the NSS. “We can conservatively add another 20% to the headline figure taking it up to £40 million.”

The NSS has now sent the report to the Health Minister, Alan Johnson, calling on him to review chaplaincy services with a view to ending taxpayer funding for them.

Mr Sanderson said: “We are not asking for an end to chaplaincy services, but we are asking that the taxpayer not be made responsible for them. In these times of financial stringency, hospitals are going to have to think very carefully about how they spend their budgets. Hospital chaplains are not on most people’s list of essential services in a health care setting. ”

Mr Sanderson said “For some people – we suspect a very few – chaplains serve a useful purpose. But most people would prefer the tens of millions spent of clerics to be spent instead on nurses, doctors, cleaners and equipment. After all, most of us go to hospital for medical treatment not for church services. Church attendance has been in decline for sixty years and the decline is independently forecast to continue.”

Mr Sanderson said that if the churches and religious bodies considered these services so vital, they should be prepared to fund them themselves.

“Most people who go into a hospital come from the local area,” said Mr Sanderson, “and it would be better if their own vicar, priest, rabbi or imam came to see them if they felt in need of religious support. This could be done as part of the clergy’s regular duties – it should not fall as a burden on the NHS.”

Mr Sanderson said he was asking the Health Minister to conduct more thorough research into what extent these services were actually used by patients and how appreciated they were. “We

get plenty of mail from people who feel they have been pestered not only by chaplains, but by religiously-motivated nurses,” he said. “Patients are not generally religious in their everyday life, and the presence of chaplains simply makes them feel unsettled and even irritated. Clergy should only be in hospital by request. A hospital should not be a happy hunting ground for religious proselytisers, whether they are chaplains or other hospital staff.”

The NSS report reveals that not only are clerics employed, but in some cases organists are on the payroll to play in chapels. In some instances, Catholic priests are called to deliver “last rites” and they charge the hospital a call-out for it. “Surely it is not the hospital’s responsibility to fund such activities,” says Terry Sanderson. “The provision of last rites and other such rituals is surely a fundamental responsibility of the Church itself.”

Terry Sanderson commented: “The average cost to the Health Service of a chaplain is £57,000 per annum. I’m sure if patients were asked where they wanted their money spent – two and a half nurses or more than four cleaners rather than one cleric – it is clear that nearly all would opt for the nursing or cleaning staff. It is time for the Church or religious organisations to accept their responsibility for providing these services in order to avoid hospitals having to cut front line medical care. It should look closely at the chaplaincy team and see what savings could be made there without any impact on patient care at all.”

[View the full list of English Hospital Trusts and what they spend on chaplains.](#)

[View report to the Department of Health](#)

(with details of what Welsh, Scottish and Northern Ireland Trusts spend)

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