

Private hospitals 'rip off patients to boost profits'

by NICOLE LE MARIE

PEOPLE using private hospitals are being overcharged as bosses exploit a lack of rivalry, a watchdog claims.

Nearly 20 hospitals may have to be sold off to ensure patients have a choice of private healthcare providers in their local area, the Competition Commission said.

It also signalled an end to cash incentives paid to doctors for directing patients to hospitals.

The three biggest groups – Spire, BMI Healthcare and HCA – were criticised by the commission for reaping high profits.

But the companies hit back, claiming no account had been taken of investment in equipment.

BMI boss Stephen Collier said: 'We reject absolutely any assertion that we exercise market power or that we make excess profits at the expense of patients.'

There are 101 British hospitals facing little competition, the commission said as it released provisional findings of an investigation begun last year. It found HCA

■ A DOCTOR will take 'tough action' on GPs failing patients in his new role. Prof Steve Field will rate standards at all surgeries as Britain's first Chief Inspector of General Practice. Health secretary Jeremy Hunt backed the appointment by the Care Quality Commission. He said Prof Field, formerly head of the Royal College of GPs, will speak up for patients 'without fear or favour'.

charged significantly higher prices to insurers than other operators, with BMI the next most costly.

Cash perks need to go because they could tempt doctors to order unnecessary tests, it added.

Smaller hospital groups and insurers, including Bupa and Axa, welcomed the recommendations.

Four in five private patients are funded by insurance premiums, often paid for by employers.