Heart patient postcode lottery is costing lives, says
British Heart Foundation

~Nation’s heart charity launches campaign to improve life-saving support for patients~

Patients in the UK face a postcode lottery of care after suffering a heart attack or having a heart operation, a British Heart Foundation (BHF) report reveals today. Cardiac rehabilitation gives heart patients a 26% greater chance of surviving in the five years following their diagnosis (1), yet in some areas just one in seven heart patients receive the treatment (2), which costs just £600 per patient.

The worrying statistics show that on average, three out of five heart patients in the UK who need rehabilitation don’t have access to it (2). Many people are needlessly dying prematurely as a result, and there is a looming risk of further funding cuts.

Currently South West London has the lowest rate of cardiac rehabilitation with only 14% of patients receiving treatment, while the highest level, 73%, is in Greater Manchester (2).

The report launched today marks the start of the BHF funded Cardiac Rehabilitation Campaign which calls for better availability and quality of treatment across the UK. People can visit bhf.org.uk/cardiacrehab to find out how they can make a difference by supporting the campaign, either by signing an online petition or by emailing their local MPs.

Cardiac rehabilitation involves nurses, physiotherapists, dieticians, psychologists and occupational therapists who work with their patients both one-to-one and in groups. Quality programmes will include:

- ongoing advice and support from medical professionals
- advice on improving lifestyle and diet
- a structured exercise programme; and
- counselling.

At the end of the average 12 week programme, patients will understand their condition, have greater confidence and be able to regain a high quality of life again.
Sue Kelly, a 51 year old heart patient from Worcestershire says: “I was lucky enough to have support from a cardiac rehabilitation nurse who took the time and patience to introduce me to ways of coping with what had happened. We had talks on medication, diet, relaxation, exercise, stress, returning to work and all the other life activities one does. Gradually I could see a light at the end of a tunnel and my optimism for life returned.

She continues: “I can honestly say that without cardiac rehab, I probably would have given up and who knows where I would be today. The medical intervention alone was not enough for me to survive this event.”

Led by a coalition of organisations including the British Heart Foundation, the British Association for Cardiac Rehabilitation (BACR) and patient groups, the campaign is calling for:

1. Cardiac rehabilitation for every suitable heart patient who wants it
2. Every cardiac rehabilitation programme to meet the minimum standards
3. Equal uptake of cardiac rehabilitation for all groups of people, including women and ethnic minorities
4. An offer of home-based cardiac rehabilitation if preferred to group programmes or hospital programmes as an outpatient

Rehabilitation programmes teach people with heart disease to become more expert and active at self-managing their conditions – an aim which is high on the UK Government’s wish list. It is also recommended by NICE (the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence). In its National Service Framework for Coronary Heart Disease, the Government set a target in 2000, that 85% of heart patients in England should be invited to attend cardiac rehabilitation. Yet only 30-40% of patients attended rehabilitation from April 2005-March 2006. Furthermore, many of the programmes across the UK are part-funded by charities like BHF or the Big Lottery Fund, and are at risk due to further Government funding cuts.

Professor Bob Lewin at the BHF Cardiac Care and Education Research Group says: “Heart and circulatory disease is the UK’s biggest killer. But with cardiac rehabilitation, many of those lives can be saved, and the quality of life for heart patients can improve dramatically. If that weren’t enough, this cost-effective treatment has been proven to reduce hospital readmission, which is not only better
for the patient, but also reassures health services commissioners that they’re allocating funds in the most sensible way”.

“We are calling for swift change and urge government officials, healthcare professionals, heart patients and their loved ones to lobby for improvements in this vital treatment.”

For detailed breakdowns of the rates of cardiac rehabilitation in each health authority, please contact the BHF press office.

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For more information on the campaign please phone the BHF press office on 020 7487 7172 or 07764 290381 (out of hours).

Notes to editors

(2) The National Audit of Cardiac Rehabilitation, Annual Statistics Report 2007

- The national campaign is backed by the British Association of Cardiac Rehabilitation (BACR), Diabetes UK, Heart Care Partnership UK, Primary Care Cardiovascular Society (PCCS), Arrhythmia Alliance – The Heart Rhythm Charity, Sudden Adult Death Trust (SAD), Mental Health Foundation, British Cardiovascular Society.
- The British Heart Foundation (BHF) is leading the battle against heart and circulatory disease – the UK’s biggest killer. The Charity is a major funder and authority in cardiovascular research. It plays an important role in funding education, both of the public and of health professionals, and in providing life-saving cardiac equipment and support for rehabilitation and care.
- For more information on heart disease, visit bhf.org.uk