Should the NHS always foot the bill?

Video transcript for ‘In This Together?’, with Michael Mosley

In 1948 the first NHS hospitals opened, offering free healthcare to all. Now some NHS boards are refusing, or at least reducing, non-emergency treatment to smokers, binge drinkers and those who are grossly overweight.

We know that bad lifestyle choices make a huge difference to health, but is it right to refuse treatment, or perhaps charge people, for making those decisions?

Those in favour of a shake-up argue that with healthcare costs soaring we cannot afford to go on as we are, and that anyway charging people will motivate them to change.

Opponents say that it won’t work and that anyway it’s wrong: it’s a form of coercion, blackmail, a threat held over the heads of the poorest members of society.

Another argument for change is that we shouldn’t be wasting scarce NHS resources on people who make poor lifestyle choices.

But what is a poor lifestyle choice? Now I cycle every day and that’s said to be healthy but on more than one occasion I’ve had a crash and cracked my ribs, arguably wasting NHS resources.

Those in favour of charging say that we shouldn’t have to pay for the bad habits of others.

Those against charging argue that it will put people off seeking the treatment they need and that anyway access to good medical care is a basic human right.

Both sides argue that what they’re proposing is in the best long-term interest of the NHS and the patients who use it.