

Will many GPs complain when bribed with £300,000 pa?

At the start of a three-part series on the future of the NHS, the Guardian commissioned Kieran Walshe, professor of health policy and management at Manchester Business School and an adviser to the Commons health select committee, to examine how GPs could profit from the reforms. His work shows GPs could more than double their average pay of £105,000 to £300,000 a year as a direct result of the reforms. At present fewer than 3% of GPs earn more than £200,000 – but Mr Walshe suggests such salaries could become the norm.

The pay of family doctors has been a source of dispute since a 2004 deal saw the average annual salary rise from £60,000 to more than £100,000. The prospect of more cash for GPs at a time of austerity and government cuts could prove deeply unpopular with the public.

According to Mr Walshe, the most lucrative ventures would see GPs setting up private companies that would turn underspends in their annual budget – in effect, savings on patient spending – into profits. He calculates that individual GPs could net more than £140,000 a year in extra income by saving 5% in commissioning costs. Another £55,000 of income each would come from taking on the responsibility of managing their local population's needs.

A quality premium is also on offer – rewarding financial performance of GP consortiums – as well as the chance for family doctors to create businesses to sell treatments to patients.

Dr Clare Gerada, chair of the Royal College of General Practitioners, told the Guardian: "GPs and patients share a unique relationship of trust. If the perception of that trusting relationship is undone then that would have serious consequences for patient care."