



# Heathgate Herald

## Practice Newsletter - an open letter to our patients

July 2021

Dear All

As Covid restrictions across the country are lifted, it seems an appropriate time to share with you where we are with the services offered from the Practice.

The last 15 months have been a challenge for us all. Despite common misconception, we have remained open throughout the pandemic with many services unchanged, some tweaked and some, which, on national advice, we did pause for safety reasons. We have, at all times, had one thing at the forefront of our minds; to maintain a safe environment for all of those who visit the surgery, both patients (and their carers) and staff.

We have adopted national NHS and Public Health Infection Control guidance which has seen our teams work in full Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) with clinicians managing patients in different ways such as telephone consultations, using photographic evidence of conditions, video and online consultations. It has been new for you and us. We are grateful to those of you who have helped us through this transition.

We have reviewed the changes and can see the benefits of some of these remaining. For example, the use of photography when discussing a skin condition has been hugely successful with our clinicians when contacting patients via the telephone. The use of SMS texting and the ability for patients to respond with photographs which are saved directly to a medical record is a great digital enhancement.

Our Practice Management Team led the Covid vaccination programme out of the Poringland Community Centre, not just for our own patients but those of 9 local Practices, which saw 44,500 vaccinations coordinated from this base. Our programme was limited to phase 1 of the national campaign and was in addition to the National Vaccination Centre in Norwich. Our clinical and non-clinical staff (along with volunteers) have played their part in manning the Centre, as well as maintaining services from the Practice.

Whilst Covid restrictions are eased from this month, NHS guidance is that face coverings and social distancing should still be adhered to when entering a health care setting and thank you in advance for following this advice.

The NHS is struggling with capacity. A bold, brave statement but a real one. However political that may sound, we are where we are and feel that we should share this with you. If you know where our challenges lay, you can help us help you.

The demand from patients for services since March has been high. A number of patients have held back from contacting us for over a year, even though we have been open, and as we ease out of the latest lockdown are contacting us now. Some of these contacts have led to conversations around serious health matters, with an increase in referrals to the hospital for suspected cancer and where ongoing conditions may have deteriorated with some services outside the Practice having been paused during the pandemic.

Our consultation and referral rates to colleagues in Mental Health Services have also seen an exponential increase. It has been a hard time for many of us with anxiety and stress levels increasing for a number of reasons through the pandemic and there are numerous resources available now on line to help manage our well-being.

As you can appreciate, patients with more serious and pressing healthcare needs remain our priority, not necessarily those who may 'shout the loudest' or 'feel they have the right to be seen on a day they choose'. These are sadly regular experiences that have disappointed us during the last few weeks when we are working our best. Again, being very honest with you, there are expectations from some patients that are placing unnecessary pressure on our services and our staff for themselves and others.

Healthcare generally is a two way thing, with self-care and personal responsibility combined with support, education and direction from a team of professionals. That team has widened with colleagues both in and outside the Practice. For example, we are increasingly looking to local Community and Practice pharmacists, social care colleagues, health visitors, school nurses, anxiety and well-being services, health related charities and colleagues from district councils (social prescribing) to support patients.

Our front line teams need to signpost patients to this wider range of health and social care providers to help manage demand and expectation from patients. Why would a GP necessarily be the most appropriate person for a patient to talk to about their social housing needs? Would a pharmacist not be an alternative professional to talk to about hay fever symptoms and medication, leaving the GP to talk to a patient about their deteriorating diabetes? And a health visitor using their broad experience with a new mum about their child's teething issues rather than taking an urgent appointment with a GP.

Our wider Practice nursing team, which we are about to enhance further, can support with the management and support of long term conditions. They are the specialists in diabetes, cardiovascular and respiratory monitoring as well as minor injury and wound care management.

To ensure patients are directed to the appropriate service, we have asked our front line receptionists to ask patients a little more about their need when you contact us so they can signpost you to the appropriate service. Some of you have found this challenging but, providing this is done in the appropriate way by our team, widening a conversation about your needs in an attempt to help you, we will ask them to continue with this.

With an element of uncertainty around the number of Covid cases, we will for the time being still screen all GP contacts with a telephone call to an agreed contact number. If possible, we will address your need via the telephone, unless the clinician feels that a face to face assessment is necessary. We will then agree a convenient time for a face to face appointment.

The demand for same day contact has seen such an increase (at times up to 90 patients suggesting they have an urgent need each weekday), to ensure we remain safe, we have needed to make additional provision to meet patient demand by reducing the number of pre-bookable appointments. This, even with an additional GP three days a week since April 2021, has meant our waiting time for routine appointments is further ahead than we would hope. Whilst this trend of urgent patient expectation continues, the waiting time for a routine appointment will be around three weeks. If we feel a patient has requested a same day need contact for a condition that is less urgent, we will defer the contact and book an appointment within an appropriate time scale.

Our dispensary team has worked like trojans at times, both with increases in the number of prescriptions issued and having to manage alternative methods of collection and delivery of items when there have been restraints on some medicine stocks at wholesalers throughout the pandemic.

Our administrators have been kept busy with changes in the way we are liaising with other parts of the NHS for referrals and screening programmes and at the moment are managing a delicate position with hospital referrals. The media has reported the lengthy waiting times in hospital settings since the pandemic and we are regularly in touch with our hospital colleagues about waiting times for first appointments after we refer for specialist intervention. Some departments are working to waiting times in excess of a year. There are, of course, urgent routes where patients meet stricter criteria and to help set expectations we will advise you of the likely wait to be seen, but this is out of our hands.

Thank you for taking the time to read this update and we will continue to work with our patients to ensure positive health outcomes. It is important we are honest and open with you about some of the current pressures we are experiencing but feel sure the NHS will rebuild stronger and wiser from the pandemic and our experiences this year will help shape services, protocols and processes as we move through 2021.



Garry Whiting  
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