

Beds & Herts LMC response to NHS England's letter to GP practices regarding face-to-face appointments

An open letter to all practices in Bedfordshire and Hertfordshire

15th September 2020

Dear All

We are writing this open letter to all our constituent practices in response to yesterday's letter from NHS England reminding practices of the importance of face-to-face appointments for those who need them. We are fully aware of the anger this letter has caused with its implication that practices have not been meeting patients' needs over the last six months.

Like everyone in the NHS, GPs and general practice staff have worked tirelessly during this period and will continue to do so into what is likely to be the most challenging winter period the NHS has ever faced. The lack of understanding and empathy shown by NHS England in making these comments only serves to demoralise an exhausted workforce and risks driving a wedge between GPs and their patients. It is also unclear as to the body of evidence NHS England hold that has made them feel they need to remind GPs how to do their job.

While so much has changed as a result of Covid-19, one element that hasn't changed is that GPs will see patients face-to-face when it is safe and clinically appropriate to do so. The decision about whether a face-to-face consultation is both safe and clinically appropriate should be made by GPs on a patient by patient basis, not by NHS England in a central office.

During the Covid pandemic practices have embraced new technologies and ways of working to ensure that their patients still have access to a safe and effective service. Many of these changes, designed to ensure that patients still have access to their GP, have been undertaken at the personal expense of the practices themselves. It therefore seems counterintuitive that rather than praise general practices for the way they have broadened these new channels of access for their patients, NHS England instead chooses to criticise them for the inevitable narrowing of face-to-face access during a global pandemic. It is disappointing that NHS England chooses not to acknowledge the huge additional burden of work that has fallen on practices during this period, often as a result of other parts of the healthcare system being unable to deliver normal patient services.

Across Bedfordshire and Hertfordshire all 183 practices, caring for over two million patients, have continued to deliver services to their patients. Despite the overwhelming workload practices are facing, on occasions where individual practices have struggled due to Covid outbreaks, other local practices have stepped in to provide support to ensure that patients are cared for. Over the past six



months we have seen countless examples of GPs and their staff putting themselves at risk in order to support their colleagues and care for patients. Sadly, as a result of the size of the challenge that the NHS has faced during this period, many of these herculean acts go unnoticed, as we become desensitised to these heroic efforts across the NHS. We believe that both NHS England and the government's time would be far better spent praising the efforts of those on the front lines of general practice rather than searching for stones to throw in what is rapidly becoming an unstable glass house.

Regardless of NHS England's letter, we know that practices will continue to provide their patients with the safe and effective care we so often take for granted. However, we hope that as we move into the challenging weeks and months ahead, NHS England will start to treat GPs and their colleagues with the same levels of empathy, care, and respect that patients up and down the country receive on a daily basis.

Your LMC continues to be here to support you, and please don't hesitate to contact the LMC office for information, support or advice.



Michael Harrison
Co-Chief Executive Officer



Dr Nicky Williams
Co-Chief Executive Officer