Tuesday, 11 January 2022

Dear patient,

I am writing to further update you on the current situation. As stated in my July letter, in my 30yrs in the practice, I have not experienced such a sustained period where demand exceeds our capacity. The current situation of staff shortages and last minute absences makes it impossible for us to offer a ‘normal’ service. Already overstretched reception and admin staff are spending hours ringing patients to cancel pre-booked appointments.

 As in every practice across the country, we are severely short staffed across the spectrum of clinical and non-clinical staff. The current situation, where absences are at a peak due to the Omicron variant, has come at a time of increased winter pressures and pent up ‘routine’ demand due to the ongoing pandemic.

You, our patients, upset that you cannot access us either electronically or on the phone. I am very well aware of the difficulties you are experiencing. Over the Christmas period we took the decision to switch off eConsults, as did most local practices. This was simply because we had no staff to process them or appointment slots to deal with them. This situation remains the same. There are occasions when we are down to a single person answering the phones.

The situation is worsening. We are doing our absolute best to meet the demand with our limited resources. In addition, staff have worked extra hours to deliver the Covid vaccination programme. Many worked most weekends, as well as extra weekday shifts, in December to meet the government target to offer boosters to all adults before 31/12/21. We did this but I am sorry to say that this week we had 784 un-booked booster appointments. Many of these were offered due to staff working extra but also cancelling booked clinics. I urge you to book a vaccine/ booster if you are yet to have one. You can do this through 119, the National Booking service [Book or manage a coronavirus (COVID-19) vaccination - NHS (www.nhs.uk)](https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/coronavirus-covid-19/coronavirus-vaccination/book-coronavirus-vaccination/) or as a walk in via grabajab.net: [Book your COVID-19 and flu vaccinations - Healthier Together (bnssghealthiertogether.org.uk)](https://bnssghealthiertogether.org.uk/book-your-vaccine/)

We are all exhausted. You are understandably frustrated. We are getting used to shortages of teachers, delivery drivers, and train staff amongst others, causing everyday difficulties. The NHS, including General Practice, is experiencing the same problems but with a relentless increase of demand. We are overstretched and we are having to make difficult decisions.

The immediate way forwards

As a result of the above, we are implementing, for the foreseeable future, a book on day system for all non-nursing/ healthcare assistant appointments. There will be some ability for clinicians to book follow up appointments but we are not able to offer any patient bookable advance slots. We too are frustrated and saddened that we cannot provide you with the excellent standard of care which we work so hard to deliver and which you rightfully expect. We will continue to review the situation regularly and return to a more settled service as soon as we can. Inevitably, owing to shortages, we are having to prioritise those with the most pressing needs. I would stress that we will continue to see patients face to face where appropriate.

 I again ask that you consider the following before you contact us:

* **Try self-help first.** Seek advice from nhs.uk. It is an excellent resource for many of the issues we are dealing with.
* **Visit your local pharmacy** for everyday illnesses. Many pharmacists can now prescribe for many minor ailments as well as offer over the counter medications.
* **Contact NHS 111**. There is a common misconception that this is an out of hours service. In fact, NHS 111 is open 24 hours a day, 7 days a week and can be used to obtain medical advice. If you require urgent care they will make arrangements for you to be seen.

Once again I want to thank all of my staff for their continuing hard work in these uniquely challenging times. I ask that you please be patient with our team when making contact with us. They really are going above and beyond.

Best wishes



Dr Paul Taylor

Executive Partner

Hanham Health