



Brookside

GROUP PRACTICE

Partners in Healthcare

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Mr Steve Feltham, MERA

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16th October 2020

Dear Mr Steve Feltham,

We were disappointed to receive your letter dated 13th October 2020 regarding the concerns raised by some of your members about the service we are providing during the Covid-19 pandemic.

We empathise with our patients that the pandemic has brought rapid changes to all areas of their lives, many of which none of us would have chosen, however we would like to reassure patients that we are very much here for them and have been throughout the pandemic. Since the 16th March when the national lockdown began we have been open, including working through all the Bank holidays during April and May, and we have continued to take blood tests, provide vaccinations and see antenatal and postnatal patients face to face throughout out this time. Nevertheless we, like everyone else, have had to work hard to adapt to ensure the patients, as well as the staff, are kept as safe as possible to reduce the transmission of the virus to those most vulnerable.

These are the areas where we have made changes and found solutions to the new ways we have to work:

- **On-line access** - we have encouraged patients to register for on-line access which means that they can order prescriptions, book appointments and look at their test result without the need to call the practice. Using on-line access for those who find it convenient and are able to, leaves the phone lines free for those who are not able to use/or do not have the internet or a computer. Over 7000 patients have signed up to use this service.
- **Routine appointments** - for all routine appointments patients can book on-line or call the practice to book a routine appointment. All routine appointments (except for vaccinations, blood tests, dressings and antenatal and postnatal) are conducted via the telephone and/or video link if appropriate. If the clinician then needs to examine the patient they are asked to attend the surgery. This ensures the patient is kept as safe as possible - away from others - and as much detail about the medical concern is gathered with social distancing in place.
- **Face to face appointments** - due to a severe lack of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) available at the beginning of the pandemic we were unable to see many patients face to face. Although we now have a supply of PPE, for each patient we must change PPE and wipe down the surfaces they may have touched which has doubled the time taken for each face to face appointment. We must do this to keep the most vulnerable patients safe but it reduces the amount of time we have to see patients.
- **Long term condition reviews** - during the first few months of the national lockdown we contacted all our extremely vulnerable patients to ensure they had the medications they needed and reviewed their conditions with them. Since then, our reviews for patients with long term conditions have been prioritised (for example, those patients with diabetes with very high sugar

levels) and have been worked through systematically. As we are half way through the year we have not yet reviewed all our patients but would hope to do this by the end of March as usual.

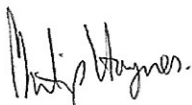
- **Blood test appointments** - many of your members may have used the "Wednesday morning walk-in blood clinic" that we have successfully run for many years. As we need to now change PPE and wipe down surfaces between each patient we are unable to see the same number of patients in a few hours as every patient needs a booked appointment. This has reduced our capacity coupled with the fact that since March the RBH discontinued its blood test service and any blood tests needed for outpatients in the last 6 months have been sent to the GP practice. The demand has increased by a third.
- **Telephone access** - we have of course seen an increase in the use of our telephone lines, both by patients ringing us and clinicians ringing them. We very quickly put in a request and asked for more telephone lines but, like all services, things have taken longer than normal and the extra lines have only just been put in place for us - we do hope patients will begin to see the difference when phoning in to us now. We have re-recorded our phone message 3 times to update patients on the current changes and guidance. We understand that phone messages can feel like they are providing a lot of information especially if a patient needs to call us several times in a short period of time but not all patients are aware of the current guidance.
- **E-consultations** - like many practices we were already working towards using electronic web forms and have now implemented "e-consultations". If a patient has a medical query that they would like a response to quicker than the next routine appointment they are now asked to complete an e-consultation on our website - no log in is required - and we will respond by the end of the next working day. These consultations can be completed any time of day or night. All the submitted forms are triaged by a GP and this ensures the most urgent concerns can be dealt with quickly. If a patient does not have the internet or a smart phone they can call the practice and we will ask them about their symptoms and they will be triaged in the same way.
- **Communication** - during this time we have tried to keep patients informed of the changes and we have over 23,500 patients with mobile numbers (over 84% of the practice patients) and we sent texts regarding opening hours, Covid information, and flu invitations as well as information about their prescription and test results. We have updated our website regularly to keep patients up to date with the changes. Patients can use our website to ask us questions, which many have, and we will respond within 2 days.
- **Doors** - we aren't able to have the surgery doors freely open at present, this is because we need to check the temperature of everyone entering the building and ask them some Covid related questions. It is also to comply with the number of people allowed in the waiting room due to the Government social distancing guidelines. We have installed an intercom at the Brookside surgery and are in the process of having them installed at Chalfont and Winnersh sites in the next few weeks. This is to enable patients to speak to reception staff more easily. If patients have booked appointments they are able to wait in the waiting room on designated chairs just before their appointment time.
- **Flu vaccinations** - we have put in place socially distanced flu immunisations for the 6000+ patients who are currently eligible for the vaccination. In order to keep our patients safe this is taking four times longer than flu clinics in previous years and is impacting on our routine nursing care. Our team of 13 Practice Nurses and Health Care Assistants are working hard to ensure long term conditions, dressings, immunisations, smear tests and blood tests are all carried out, however the wait for some of these procedures are slightly longer than normal. We have recruited another full time member of staff to help with this.
- **Emergencies** - whilst most patients will call 999 if they have a serious medical emergency, if they do call the practice nothing has changed and they can press 9 for urgent medical advice such as chest pain or a symptoms of a stroke. Outside of our hours, for example during the night, patients can still call 111 for advice.

- **Secondary care work** - you will be aware that since March hospitals needed to cancel much of their scheduled care in order to make space to deal with the demands of the first wave of the pandemic. This has led to many patients being asked to return to their GP practice for care for example for blood tests, prescriptions, monitoring and examinations. This has added to the workload of the practice and as yet has not returned to the hospitals. There is no additional funding for us to do this work.
- **Dermatology** - we have created a new clinic for patients who are concerned about changes in their skin, such as an increased mole, and using the technology available ask patients to send us a photo which is reviewed by our specialised dermatology GPs and PAs. Patients can then be contacted regarding advice and asked to attend a face to face/minor op appointment where needed.


We understand that this season is causing a lot of concern for patients who have very real health issues which they need help with, but we are doing our best to try and help them with the resources we have whilst keeping them safe. Lastly of course, we cannot ignore the fact that we are also an organisation, made up of over 100 staff, which simply cannot run effectively without our people; whether that be reception, administration, management or clinical personnel, and so we have also had to help them manage the same challenges facing our patients. Each week a number of staff are isolating due to symptoms or having been in contact with someone who has tested positive for Covid-19, or simply because they have children who are isolating.

We hope this sheds some light on the challenges we continue to face during this season and reassure you that Patient Care is our number one priority within the limits of what is currently possible. We appreciate your members bearing with us as we continue to work hard to respond to the ever-changing challenges of this pandemic under the guidance of NHS England. We would like to encourage members not to be complacent; whilst it may feel in Wokingham that the pandemic is not currently an issue, the "R" number is increasing quite quickly and we are very likely to see a sudden increase over the next few weeks and we will need to have the capacity to care for those who do become unwell.

Kind regards,



Dr Philip Haynes
Senior Partner



Sarah Rutland
General Manager