



Open Letter to our Patients. Winter '21

Since March 2020 it has been a very challenging time for patients and the team at the surgery. Firstly, we would like to say thank you so much for all the support and positive feedback we have had from so many of our patients during this time. We would also like to take some time to explain to you all the ongoing pressures that the surgery and all General Practice continues to work under.

The pandemic has forced us to adopt new ways of working to allow us to maintain social distancing to keep everyone safe. This includes an increase in telephone consultations to triage patients and changes to clinics to help allow social distancing. This creates additional workload on all the staff as a consultation which previously would have happened face to face now may require multiple contacts with the surgery. However, our doors remained open throughout lockdown, and we have been providing face-to-face nursing and doctors' appointments when clinically required throughout the pandemic including at our branch surgery site in Shinfield.

From December 2020 we were one of the first practices to sign up and roll out the COVID vaccination initiative providing clinical and admin staff including in evenings and weekends to ensure as many people as possible could be vaccinated as soon as possible. This task was done by our existing staff, with no additional staff available, while maintaining our normal medical care for over 15,000 patients.

Our team has been working hard throughout the pandemic but with the easing of lockdown demand has increased to unprecedented levels. We receive more calls than ever before; we have installed a new telephone system and are recruiting new receptionist but despite our best efforts we know the wait to get through is often longer than we would like it to be.

If you are waiting in a queue this is because all our team are busy helping other patients at that time. We are being asked to deal with minor issues on an urgent basis, patients are wishing to discuss multiple problems within



one appointment or are asking about hospital related matters such as the long waiting time for a response to a referral rather than the correct route of contacting the hospital directly.

When the doctors are not dealing directly with patients, they are sending referrals, reading letters from consultants about the care you have received and any follow ups required, reviewing test results and signing repeat medication prescriptions. The doctors and all staff are working harder and longer days to try and fit this all in.

All of this has the potential to lead to unsafe working and burnout within our team. We care about our patients; recognise the frustrations you feel about waiting to get through on the phone and that our appointments get filled quickly but we do not have the resource to do more than we are doing. The government has plans to help the backlog in hospitals, but no such plans to help General Practice with this issue of capacity not meeting the current demand.

We are so grateful for all the kind words of thanks and appreciation from so many of you. However, we are saddened by the increased abuse we have all experienced over recent months. We try our very best to treat each one of our patients with curtesy and respect, and we strongly feel that every member of our staff should expect patients to behave in the same way to them.

Aggressive or abusive language towards our staff will not be tolerated and any patient found to be behaving in such a way will be sent a written warning. The lack of resources in General Practice is a national and indeed historical problem and not something faced by Swallowfield alone. We ask for your help to provide the best service we can and ensure we can support those patients in most urgent clinical need.

For minor ailments and injuries please consider other services, such as the pharmacy or NHS online advice services before you contact the surgery. There are many helpful links on our surgery website which may answer your



questions. When a receptionist asks for details about your symptoms, please provide these as it allows them to try and book you with the best person to help with your problems.

All our multidisciplinary team have access to the duty doctor and so if they are not able to help, they will be guided by a GP as to the best course of action. We have three paramedics, a clinical pharmacist, a first contact physiotherapist, diabetic specialist nurse and nurses with special interests in contraception, asthma and COPD. All these clinicians have a wide range of knowledge to help manage both acute and chronic medical conditions.

We also ask that when you do have an urgent clinical need you do let us know and explain your position to help us direct our resources to where they are really needed.

Following news coverage of GP's being asked to carry out more face-to-face appointments we wanted to share our figures with you. The current national average for face-to-face appointments is 57%. On a consistent basis, over 75% of our appointments are face to face. We still have telephone consultation appointments available however for those patients who feel they would prefer this.

We thank all our patients for their support and patience over the last few months which have been extremely busy for general practice across the country.

Dr William Beacham & Partners