

Registering with a GP practice and booking appointments

An investigation into what patients need to do to register with a GP practice in Dorset and make appointments.

Preface

Healthwatch is the national independent consumer champion for health and social care, established throughout England in 2013 under the provisions of the Health and Social Care Act 2012, with statutory powers to ensure that the voice of the consumer is strengthened and heard by those who commission, deliver and regulate health and care services. Healthwatch exists in two distinct forms - local Healthwatch, and Healthwatch England at national level.

The remit of local Healthwatch encompasses all publicly funded health and social care services for both adults and children. Healthwatch Dorset covers the area of the three local authorities of Dorset, Poole and Bournemouth.

As part of the remit to gather views, Healthwatch Dorset also has the power to “enter & view” services and undertake announced or unannounced visits and request information.

We would like to thank our volunteers for undertaking this piece of work and Healthwatch Portsmouth and Healthwatch Isle of Wight for sharing information.

Disclaimer: Please note that this report relates to findings on specific dates and may not be a representative portrayal of the experiences of all patients, only an account of what occurred at the time.

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Introduction and Background

The five Local Healthwatch within the Wessex region have been gathering feedback from local people regarding the process of registering with a GP practice and making appointments with GPs. Healthwatch Portsmouth, Healthwatch Southampton, Healthwatch Hampshire and Healthwatch Isle of Wight have already published their reports. This report from Healthwatch Dorset completes the picture for the Wessex region.

The NHS itself advises ([on the NHS Choices website](#)): *“You should not be refused registration or appointments because you don’t have a proof of address or personal identification at hand. It is not considered a reasonable ground to refuse registration. This also applies if you are an asylum seeker, refugee, a homeless patient or an overseas visitor, whether lawfully in the UK or not”*.

The British Medical Association (BMA) [advice](#) states *“there is no contractual duty to seek evidence of identity or immigration status or proof of address. Therefore, practices should not refuse registration on the grounds that a patient is unable to produce such evidence. Anyone who is in England is entitled to receive NHS primary medical services at a GP practice and applications for registration for any patient in England must be considered in exactly the same way, regardless of country of residence”*.

In order to get a wider picture across the region and to review current practice in GP surgeries across Dorset, Poole and Bournemouth, Healthwatch Dorset have undertaken the same piece of work, carrying out a mystery shopping exercise to understand what guidance/information is provided to patients about registering, how easy it is to get routine and urgent appointments, whether GP opening times are equitable across the county and also whether information provided about NHS111 services (whether through Out of Hours phone messages or online) is correct.

This report sets out our findings.

July 2017

Our Methodology

To be able to compare results with other Healthwatch, we followed a similar methodology to that already taken by Healthwatch Portsmouth and Healthwatch Isle of Wight. Focussing on phone lines and websites, Healthwatch Dorset volunteers anonymously telephoned all 97 GP practices in the county to ask about how to register as a patient with the practice and how book an appointment. They also telephoned the practices out of hours to listen to their phone messages and cross-referenced this with information found on the practices' websites. We provided volunteers with guidance and templates including scenarios and questions.

Questions for the GP practice:

- How do I register and what information do I need?
- What are the waiting times for routine and urgent appointments?
- How can appointments be booked?
- What are the surgery opening times?

Reviewing of Out of Hours messages:

- Was the surgery name given?
- Were surgery opening hours given?
- Were you redirected correctly? (i.e. NHS111 and 999)
- Were you told that NHS111 is free to call?
- Were you advised whether you could or could not leave a message?

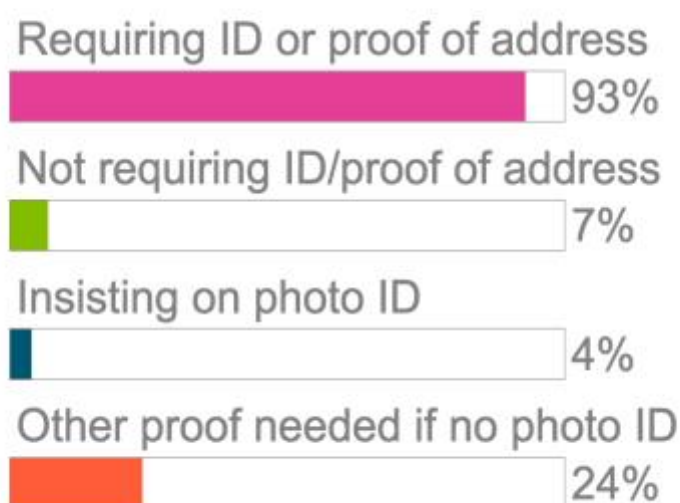
Website review:

- Does the surgery website give correct Out of Hours information and was this the same as that provided on the Out of Hours phone message?
- Does the website give the same information as you were provided by phone for registration?

Findings & Recommendations

Registering with a GP practice:

Practices requiring ID or proof of address in order to register as a patient



- Only 7 practices did not require ID or proof of address to register as a patient.
- 4 practices advised that patients “must have” photo ID in order to register.
- 23 practices advised that proof of address or another form of ID was required if no photo ID was available.
- 1 practice advised that they had a full list and were not taking on new patients, so further questions could not be asked.
- 1 practice would not provide information unless an address was provided.

A review of the practices’ websites showed:

- 13 practices had differing information about registration than was given during the call (e.g. on the call they said that photo ID was needed but their website said it was not, and vice versa)

- 1 website was under review, so information was not available and where 1 practice would not provide information over the phone a comparison with the website could not be made.
- 2 practices did not have their own website but used NHS Choices with links to registration forms.

Recommendations

Although we acknowledge that practices may require ID and/or proof of address for administration purposes, when patients call or enquire about how to register they should not be told that it is a requirement for this information to be provided. Although some practices, when pushed, said that they would “do what they could” or would “work with the patient” if no proof of ID or photo was available, not all patients would think to (or even be comfortable with) questioning the information given or feel able to say, “what happens if I don’t have that information?”.

Websites should be up to date, reflect what patients are told over the phone and should provide the correct information for registration. A link to registration information on NHS Choices would help patients, although at this current time that conflicts with the fact that only 7% of practices say that no ID or proof of address is required.

Booking appointments

Waiting times for routine appointments:



4 weeks

Longest waiting time for routine appointment



Next day

Shortest waiting time for routine appointments

We acknowledge that we can only provide a “snapshot” of the waiting times when we made our calls and this can change depending on each practice’s circumstances.

Waiting times for routine appointments ranged from next day to 4 weeks (depending on which GP the patient wanted to see).

Waiting times for urgent appointments:

All except 2 practices (1 where the patient list is closed and 1 which did not provide information) said that they would usually be able to provide same day appointments for urgent cases. However, many said that patients would need to call the practice early morning (8am) to see if an appointment would be available.

How appointments can be booked:

All practices said that patients could book routine appointments either in person, over the phone or online. However, online services varied from allowing patients to book, amend and cancel appointments for all the services or just for certain services and clinics/tests etc. All required patients to register for online services (which itself required some form of ID).

Not all practices appear to use the same system for online booking. There is likely to be some inconsistency in the systems but as patients need to be registered (again an issue for those with no ID) to access online booking we were unable to check this further.

Surgery opening times

The current GMS (General Medical Services) contract for GP surgeries states that practices are contractually required to provide GMS services during core hours, i.e. between 8am and 6.30pm, Monday to Friday except Good Friday, Christmas Day and Bank Holidays. Practices “*must provide the services at such times within the core hours as are appropriate to meet the reasonable needs of its patients and to have in*

place arrangements for its patients to access such service throughout core hours in the case of emergency”.

We found many discrepancies between the information given over the phone and information provided on practice websites and NHS Choices (and on Google)

- Most surgeries said that they opened from 8.30am (just over 40% said that they opened from 8am) until between 6pm and 6.30pm.
- 1 practice closed for half a day on one day and 1 practice closed at 4pm on 1 day. 2 practices closed between 5.30pm and 6pm
- One surgery had the longest opening hours of 8am to 7.30pm Monday to Friday.
- Many practices offered extended hours on some mornings and evenings - usually for pre-booked appointments but sometimes for all appointments. The latest a practice opened until was 8.30pm
- 3 surgeries said that they offered some Saturday morning appointments.
- No surgeries provided Sunday opening.
- As above, many websites had differing information to that provided on the phone. For example, 1 surgery said that they were open 9am to 6.30pm Mon to Fri, but their website stated there is also a walk-in Saturday surgery between 8.30am and 11am. Other websites said that practices which open until 6.30pm lock their doors at 6pm for security purposes and patients need to phone for instructions.
- Not all practices are open for actual GP appointments during the core hours (even though the surgery reception and other services may be available) but may have a couple of hours of surgery morning and evening with GPs available on the phone at other times and many actually close at lunch.

Recommendations:

We acknowledge that practices can decide, to an extent, their own GP availability during core hours, based on their specific patient demographics. However, this means that patients across the county are not being offered an equitable service. (It should be noted that both the surgeries with early closing are based in the same area.)

Information given over the phone should reflect that provided on websites.

When requesting details of opening times over the phone patients should also be advised when it is the case that, for example, the surgery opening times are 8am to 6.30pm, actual GP appointments will not be available during all of this time.

The confusion around opening times could lead to a patient not being aware that their practice is open on a Saturday, for example, or is having extended hours on particular days, and this may mean that patients try to contact NHS111, access a Minor Injuries Unit or even attend a local A&E department unnecessarily or inappropriately.

We would like to see commissioners taking this forward with all GPs, to at least ensure all practices are opening during the mandatory core hours.

Practices need to check website information and also that all relevant staff have a common understanding of relevant information to be given to patients.

Content of Out of Hours Message

Was the surgery name given?

All except 22 practices (22%) stated the surgery name. Providing the surgery name helps callers identify that they have rung the correct number.

Were opening hours given?

All except 18 (18%) of practices stated opening hours. Providing opening hours enables callers to know when to call back.

Were callers redirected correctly to Out of Hours services?

All practices correctly advised callers to contact NHS111, but not all mentioned 999 for emergencies.

Were callers informed NHS111 is a free to call service?

All except 24 (24%) stated that the NHS111 out of hours' service was free to use, even from mobile phones. A few also advised that if calling from a pay-as-you-go mobile at least 1p credit on the phone would be required.

Were callers advised that they couldn't leave a message?

Whilst it appears that none of the out of hours' answerphones have the facility to leave a message, only 11 practices inform callers of this. This may cause difficulties where a caller has thought that they have left a message and are hoping for a response.

Recommendations:

We recommend that all practices review their out of hours' phone message and make changes where needed. A suggested message would be:

"Thank you for calling (insert surgery name). We are now closed and will reopen (insert opening hours), except for Bank Holidays (plus any other time). If you have a potentially life threatening condition, please hang up immediately and dial 999. For any other medical queries that cannot wait until the surgery reopens, please hang up and dial 111, this is a free service from both landlines and mobiles although if you are calling from a pay-as-you-go mobile you will need to have at least 1p credit. Please note that it is not possible to leave a message on this phone line. Thank you"

It should also be noted that a few messages also provided useful information and contact details for local Minor Injuries Units, walk-in centres and pharmacies. We recommend that this become standard for all practices

Website Out of Hours advice and information

All practice websites were checked for Out of Hours advice and information. Whilst all except 1 had some kind of information or signposting, many only gave a very brief summary- e.g. “emergency out of hours’ number 111” or even “Out of Hours 111”. Many did not say that NHS111 is free to call and some only had the symbol:



Unless the computer mouse is hovered over this symbol it is not obvious that there is a link from here to [NHS Choices full NHS111 advice](#). On some sites, this symbol was small and located a long way down the first page and not obvious unless the user scrolled down the page.

On many sites, the Out of Hours information was difficult to find, maybe located under “Opening times” or “Contact Us” and not on the first page. Some sites advised patients, for example “If you need to see a doctor urgently when the surgery is closed, please phone the surgery on XXXX and follow the instructions”. When the surgery is rung, you are directed to ring 111. Although not incorrect information, it would be clearer to direct patients straight to 111.

Some sites had very comprehensive information, maybe linking to NHS Choices or providing details of local Minor Injuries Units, walk-in centres, or pharmacies and also providing information in other languages and formats. Some also advised that if calling NHS111 from a pay-as-you-go mobile then at least 1p credit would be required.

Recommendations:

We recommend that all practices review their websites to ensure that Out of Hours information is up to date, clear and obvious on the first page near the top, so that users do not have to scroll down pages or click through sites (people who are looking for this information are likely to be in a hurry or in distress, so information should be very bold and very obvious).

Websites should also signpost people to the Typetalk and Textphone facilities.

References

- NHS Choices, [online] Available from <http://www.nhs.uk/NHSEngland/AboutNHSservices/doctors/Pages/NHSGPs.aspx> [Accessed March 2017]
- British Medical Association “*Patient registration for GP practices*” [online] Available from <https://www.bma.org.uk/advice/employment/gp-practices/service-provision/patient-registration-for-gp-practices> [Accessed March 2017]

Appendix

Distribution List for this Report

- NHS Dorset Clinical Commissioning Group
- GP practices in Dorset
- Dorset Health & Well-Being Board
- Bournemouth & Poole Health & Well-Being Board
- Dorset, Bournemouth and Poole Health Scrutiny Committees
- CQC (Care Quality Commission)
- Healthwatch England
- NHS England
- Bournemouth, Poole and Dorset Local Authorities

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