Dear Patients

What a past year or so we have been through! We've made a lot of changes over this time so we wanted to write to our patients to explain some of these and update you about our current services at The Valleys Medical Partnership.

First – some background. At the start of the pandemic we were asked by the government to move to a "triage first" system and away from the traditional face to face (F2F) model that we had practised. This means that rather than being given a timed appointment at the surgery, GPs will call patients initially or ask them to fill in an online eConsult. If it is then felt that a F2F appointment is needed then this will be arranged, usually soon after the telephone call/eConsult. We do have call buzzers on our doors to restrict access – this is to protect the patients in our waiting rooms and maintain social distancing.

In the last few months as life has returned towards the pre-pandemic "normal", there have been calls from parts of the media for GPs to go back to the old model of F2F appointments. We have learned a lot over the past 2 years and we believe some of the changes we have made have enabled an improvement in the service we provide, and this is one that we would be happy to offer to our own family and friends. As a Partnership we have discussed our options for moving forward and for the time being at least we have decided to stick with the triage first model. We understand for some patients this will be frustrating to hear, but we want to explain why we think this model is better for patients and GPs:

* Demand is increasing – both due to an aging population and societal changes, this means we have more appointment requests than ever before (one million more GP appts were delivered nationally in July 2021 v July 2019) – at the same time the GP workforce is shrinking despite government attempts to train more GPs, and we are also delivering the biggest vaccination program the country has ever seen.
* For many patients, especially those with work or other commitments a phonecall/eConsult is more convenient and avoids them having to take time out of work. Some problems can be dealt with a quick email reply, meaning that GP saves time that can then be spent with more complex patients.
* The current system gives us greater flexibility – if a patient has more complex needs we do have the opportunity to spend longer than 10 minutes with them and sort them properly, rather than building up a waiting room full of angry patients because we are running late
* Improved continuity – we know that the same problem is usually best dealt with by the same GP, the current system means we can check who has seen a patient previously and allocate the most appropriate GP to manage that case
* Other health professionals – given the national shortage of GPs we have recruited other members to the team who may be better at managing certain conditions, such as First Contact Physios (FCPs), Pharmacists and a Health and Wellbeing Coach. By providing information to our receptionists this means that you may be asked to speak to one of these allied health professionals first, freeing up GPs to spend more time on those who can only be managed by a GP.
* These changes mean our wait time for a routine call is much shorter than it was pre-pandemic, meaning a better service for our patients
* Although life is returning to normal Covid hasn't gone away and we must continue to protect the most vulnerable in our society and protect the hospitals and continue to reduce the chance of spread. We continue to practice social distancing, regular cleaning and wearing of PPE.

We do appreciate that some people will still need to be seen F2F. We would encourage you to be honest with us about your symptoms and if a F2F appointment is needed it will be arranged.

We have an excellent team of receptionists who have worked hard throughout the pandemic, ensuring that you are directed to the most suitable service for you. At times they are under pressure, so we ask that you are kind and patient whilst they do their job. We have heard of reports in the media of receptionists being subject to abuse, foul language and general rudeness. This leads to an unpleasant working environment and we want to protect our team from this.

We'd like to thank you, our patients for being understanding whilst these changes have been made, and we will continue to develop our service. For anyone that is interested in reading more about the issues that General Practice is facing currently we would recommend looking at the British Medical Association's website and the #supportyoursurgery campaign:

<https://www.bma.org.uk/advice-and-support/covid-19/gp-practices/support-your-surgery>

For those of you that would like to be more involved we would encourage you to get in touch with us to join our Patient Participation Group which is able to directly be involved in improving the care our patients receive. Please also look for our social media pages on Facebook and Twitter which are regularly updated with the latest information from the practice.

Kind regards

Dr L Moss

Dr R Butler

Dr V Gupta

Dr R Handscombe

Dr B Marney

Mr G Williamson

Dr T Martin