

Focus on - GP practices

Patient feedback on accessing GP services and changes made due to Covid-19

This is a focus on feedback reported to Healthwatch Worcestershire in relation to GP services from 1st April to 10th September 2020. Intended to identify any specific issues that have arisen during the Covid-19 period and as a result of changes implemented by GP practices. This includes feedback received from:

1. HWW Covid-19 Survey
2. HWW Learning Disabilities and Autism Covid-19 Survey
3. Other feedback reported to HWW - Signposting / patient experience

Summary of feedback

The feedback received shows mixed experiences of accessing GP practices during Covid-19. While many have given praise to their practices for good responsive care and use of telephone and video calls as a convenient way of accessing timely diagnosis for straight forward issues the following concerns have been raised -

- Potential for delayed diagnosis due to remote consultations
- Difficulty in accessing appointments, in particular face-to-face appointments when patients feel this is required
- Difficulties for some groups of patients in having remote consultations, receiving online or text communication and accessing online services - e.g. elderly, people with a learning disability and those with sensory impairments.
- Lack of specific time slots for telephone and video consultations
- Issues around privacy and confidentiality when having remote consultations by telephone or video call
- Reinstatement of checks for long term conditions and how these can work effectively remotely if patients are required to purchase equipment and take own readings
- How new arrangements, such as waiting outside the surgery and telephoning on arrival will work going forward
- Variance in the way in which different practices in Worcestershire have responded to pandemic and are implementing changes
- Variance in communication with patients about accessing services, explanation of changes and reassurance that GP practices are open and available to patients
- Importance of ensuring effective communication especially with carers, people with disabilities and those from minority ethnic groups who may experience language barriers.

1. HWW Covid-19 Survey

Between 22nd April and 23rd July **2,473 people** responded to our survey to provide feedback about their experiences of accessing information and health and social care services during the Covid-19 pandemic.

i. Communication

Communication received from GP practices about changes to services:

- 58% - Excellent or good
- 17% - Fair
- 9% - Poor or very poor
- 16% (297 people) - Had not received any communication from their GP Practice

N.B. - More people in Worcester City and Redditch reported that they had not received any communication about GP services than in other Districts. People in these areas also rated communication received as Poor or Very Poor more frequently than elsewhere. Carers rated communication from GP services less favourably than other respondents.

Example positive comments relating to GP communication -

- *'GP sent texts to explain changes to service'*
- *'We have been kept fully informed by text messages, emails and the Facebook page of our surgery'*

Example comments re issues / concerns re communication -

- *'Unless you are on Facebook it was difficult to find out how the GP practice was operating initially and if your prescription could be delivered'*
- *'There hasn't been a great deal of communication from the healthcare services with regards to changes to their services. It would have been very helpful if GPs send letters with more information on how to access the services and to reassure people that they can still use them without fear of burdening the NHS.'*
- *'There's been poor coordination across the NHS in Worcestershire e.g. changes to GP surgery access and pharmacy delivery schedules without text messages or emails. Patients discover these when they visit the website e.g. to renew a prescription which is far too late!'*

Responses relating to accessing information on specific topics:

- 16% told us they had found it difficult to find information about healthcare services they usually access.

- Overall, difficulty finding information about healthcare services was 4th most frequently selected topic, behind testing for Coronavirus, PPE and infection control. However, more recent responses 26th May to 23rd July, it was 2nd after looking after mental health and wellbeing.

ii. Accessing GP services

Experiences of those who had needed to access GP:

- 66% - Easy to access
- 23% - Difficult to access
- 11% - Choose not to access

N.B. Lower numbers of Carers and people who identified themselves as White Other rated GP practices as Easy to Access.

Comments relating to accessing GP practices:

- **56** comments giving **praise** for GP practices, organisation of response, providing a good service and the use of telephone calls and video calls
- **52** comments about **issues or concerns** relating to GP practices

iii. Issues raised

- Being unable to contact practice by phone
- Being unable to get face to face appointments
- Dissatisfaction with telephone and video appointments
- Feeling that GP practice is discouraging patients from accessing the service
- Being unable to access routine treatment for long term conditions

Use of telephone / video appointments -

- 'Consultation by phone is not effective and I don't believe it is possible to help a person with any problems without seeing the symptoms'

Reinstatement of NHS services -

- 'GP and local surgeries are not offering nurse lead treatments unless life threatening which leaves people without medical help for basic wellbeing. A blanket ban on all these treatments/tests is not acceptable 10 weeks on from lock-down. GP surgeries are not overrun and should be using full PPE and staggered times to keep the public well. This ban has been taken to extremes and gone on for too long.'

- *'Nurse at local GP on June 1st still refusing to syringe my ears (as done annually) due to an ongoing ear condition and after being left for almost 3 months, now turned into an infection.'*
- *'Health services are not available. Can get a phone consultation with a doctor but can't get a time so often miss the calls as working. Hopeless. Took 2 weeks and spoke to a doctor, can't see one'*
- *'The general impression given out has been unless you have Covid 19, stay away from NHS provision.'*
- *'Advised not to bother GP unless I was in pain or had an infection. So I haven't been in contact about on-going issues as I feel like I am a drain to the system.'*

Lack of reasonable adjustments -

- *'GP refused to call an interpreter'*

iv. Positive changes to health services during Covid-19

- 211 people said the use of telephone / video calls for GP and other health appointments had been positive
- However, 246 people said they could not identify any positive changes to services

N.B. As majority of Covid-19 surveys were completed online, the respondents may be more likely to rate online and remote access to GP service more highly and have received communication from their practice online. The highest number of responses were completed in April and May, when we were in strict lockdown and therefore expectations about what services practices should be able to offer and how they may wish to access services may be different to current expectations.

<p>2. HWW Learning Disability and Autism Covid-19 Survey</p>

84 people completed HWW's Learning Disability and Autism Covid-19 Survey. Responses suggest that some people with a learning disability and Autism find it more difficult to communicate via phone or video call. Having access to and using technology required for video calls is also a potential issue, especially without support. Some were concerned about not having checks and support to manage long term conditions such as diabetes. Some people are anxious about going out and attending medical appointments, both in terms of Covid-19 related risk and things being different - e.g. people wearing masks and if person supporting them is not able to come into appointment with them.

3. Other feedback reported to HWW - Signposting / patient experience

Between 1st April and 10th September 2020, we received feedback from **49 people** about accessing their GP practice during Covid-19.

17 people gave feedback about their **positive experiences**. These were mainly people telling us that they had received good communication or a quick response from their GP practice when they had contacted them. Including receiving timely call backs, diagnosis, reassurance, treatment or follow up as appropriate and an example of efficient process for organising seasonal flu vaccination. Two people specifically mentioned that they felt that having telephone appointments was more convenient for them and they would like to continue this in future. One person told us that their practice had sent out links to three YouTube films throughout the pandemic, explaining changes and access to the surgery, the restoration of services and how flu clinics would be operating.

32 people gave us feedback about **issues or concerns** relating to their experiences of accessing their GP. Issues raised are -

i. Concerns about remote consultation

9 people expressed concerns about the effectiveness of remote consultations by phone or video call with regard to effective diagnosis of an issue.

Of these, 5 people gave us examples of telephone consultations, which did not correctly diagnose the issue or recognise the seriousness of the situation. In three of these cases the individual ended up in hospital. In all of these cases the individuals felt that a correct diagnosis and treatment could have been made sooner if they had been offered a face-to-face appointment with a GP when they initially contacted the practice. In two cases they felt that emergency admission to hospital could have been avoided. In three of these cases the individual had one or more than one telephone consultation with an Advanced Nurse Practitioner before they were able to speak with a GP.

3 people told us that they thought remote consultations would not work for either themselves or someone that they cared for including 2 older people and someone who is deaf and has a visual impairment.

2 people expressed concerns about potentially being asked to send photos to the GP due to privacy.

Someone raised concerns about being prescribed medication, such as Beta Blockers, remotely without having blood pressure or heart rate checked.

Another person reported that they did not feel they had an understanding of outcome of variety of tests, due to difficulties getting hold of GP and consultations taking place remotely.

ii. Contacting the practice / responsiveness

7 people told us that they felt that GPs were reluctant to see patients face to face. This included comments about only being offered phone appointments and having to get through the Care Navigators in order to get an appointment.

5 people told us about the difficulties they have had contacting their practice by phone and being unable to get through. 1 person told us that following a long wait for a call back from the GP they took themselves to A&E and were admitted to hospital.

4 people raised concerns about not being given a specific time slot for a telephone consultation, meaning that you are unable to do things for fear of missing the call and that it is more difficult to ensure the opportunity for privacy when you do receive the call. One of the individuals told us they were aware others from their practice had concerns about this.

1 person contacted us with concerns about the message on the GP practice answer machine / recorded message, as they felt it discouraged people from seeking medical care and had not changed since the beginning of lockdown.

1 person told us that they had received a text message from their practice telling them to book a flu vaccination, but when they phoned as requested, they queued for 45 minutes before abandoning the call.

Another person was unhappy about the communication in general from their practice in relation to changes and access:

'Total lack of communication from the practice during changes arising from the pandemic.'

iii. Management of long-term conditions

3 people told us they had not had regular checks for long term conditions which should have taken place. We were also told that information sent to patients with long term conditions from one practice suggested that as checks would happen remotely, patients were encouraged to purchase a blood pressure monitor, so they could provide blood pressure reading along with height and weight information for the check-up.

iv. Attending the surgery

3 people told us that their practice required people to wait outside to be called in for their appointments. While this works well if you are able to wait in a car or the weather is good, concerns were raised about how this will work over the winter months.

2 people raised concerns about being required to phone the practice on arrival. In one case as they do not have a mobile phone and in another because the phone number given was incorrect.

We have also had a concern raised by someone who had been told that at one GP practice blood tests were being carried out in the car park.

v. Accessing online systems

2 people told us about the difficulties of elderly person accessing online system in order to request repeat prescriptions, in terms of getting the system set up and having the correct software.

vi. Advice about Covid-19 testing and PPE

One person told us that their GP had not been able to provide advice about a Covid-19 home testing kit, although they had arranged for it to be sent to the patient. Another person was unhappy about the advice being given to a patient about the need to wear a face covering in view of their existing health conditions.