

SPECIAL EDITION

West Wirral Group Practice Patient Participation Group Newsletter November 2021

Introduction

It is sometime since a PPG Newsletter was circulated to patients. The constantly changing circumstances within the medical sector has made it difficult to find the right time to send out an update. No sooner had a draft newsletter been done, than circumstances or facts had changed again.

However, the PPG now feels it should let patients know what the Practice is having to deal with, and what patients should expect when they need to contact the Practice.

In health care, the situation is very far from normal. Since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic things have changed significantly, and in the fast moving situation could change again at any time. The way of working is unlikely to return to the pre-pandemic routines in the near future — if at all.

Throughout this winter it is expected that the whole NHS will be under great pressure. It is struggling on all fronts. Most patients will have read about the issues, or experienced them for themselves. Things like – increased delays in treatment, longer waiting lists, delays to ambulance and A&E response times, unprecedented numbers of people to be vaccinated, as well as the numbers of people infected with Covid and suffering from long-Covid.

All of these things have resulted in unknown demand for GP practices. On top of this high demand, the way practices have been forced to work has changed with the requirement for social distancing and increased hygiene procedures.

What we in the PPG know is that staff at The Warrens are working very hard, and are doing everything they can to prioritise and treat as many patients as possible. We think that staff deserve full credit for these efforts.

Equally, it is very important that patients appreciate what is being done, and show patience and understanding while seeking medical attention. Anyone who is unwell should of course seek care, but the best thing we can all do is not add to the stress of the staff while doing so.

Things are unlikely ever to be as they were two years ago and if there are greater health issues over the winter, as is feared, we should not be surprised if there have to be more changes to keep the service operating as well as possible.



GP ACCESS

General practitioners (GPs) are on the front-line in the battle against Covid-19 and have a key role to play in the management of the crisis. They are involved in the education, triage and diagnosis of patients with illnesses other than Covid-19, and in screening for those at risk of developing severe symptoms of Covid-19.

All GP practices, including The Warrens, are open, and have been open throughout the Pandemic, and are here to help. However, because of Coronavirus, the way patients are seen in surgeries has had to change. Surgeries have had to be adapted, not only in the space and access available for patients but also in the way we contact our GP so that they can provide continuity of care.

GPs at The Warrens, like all other GPs, are wearing PPE and have to keep the social distancing rule of 2-metres in the surgery: Social distancing rules, imposed by NHS England have resulted in far fewer chairs in the waiting area. Face to face contact has had to be kept to a minimum to keep everyone safe. To avoid unnecessary close contact and visits to the surgery, most appointments, in the first instance, have to be triaged. For patients with access to the internet, a system called eConsult provides an online way to contact a doctor. Those without internet access can ring the practice,

Unfortunately, the e-Consult system, once publicised as a helpful tool for both GPs and patients, is now causing its own problems. It requires quite a long, laborious form to fill in, and most people, including Practice staff, agree that there is room for the form to be improved. The surgery, however, has no control over this. eConsult is currently available for patients to use up to 3pm, Monday to Friday, which is less than it used to be. It recently became necessary to remove weekends and put a weekday cut-off time due to the number of forms being received by GPs. As each form had to be evaluated and responded to within a set timescale, it put huge pressure on the Practice staff, resulting in GPs often having to work until 10pm to get through the huge amount of paperwork. Sadly, this was made worse by a few patients using eConsult inappropriately, so exacerbating the demand on GPs and Practice staff.

Patients or their representatives telephoning the surgery will be asked a number of questions by the receptionist who will take appropriate action as part of the triage process. All these staff have been highly trained to do this so do not be afraid to tell them what is wrong with you. They are there to help you and want to get you to the right person for your enquiry.

Triaging patients just means that patients illnesses are assigned degrees of urgency so that the order of treatment of a large number of patients can be decided. Those patients who GPs need to see face to face will be asked to go to the surgery, and the patients the GP believes can be dealt with over the phone or via video link, will be contacted in this way once a time has been agreed with the receptionists.

Depending on what is wrong with patients, some patients will be asked to send in a photograph or may have included a photograph in their eConsult form. In those cases, this helps GPs see the severity of the problem. Telephone appointments are not suitable for everyone. If you need a physical examination or blood test, for example, you and your GP can reach a decision on what is best for you.

Unfortunately, using the surgery's telephones has also become increasingly difficult due to the new ways of working. In addition to the well known difficulties of getting through to the surgery, both inward and outward calls have sometimes been cut off in the middle of a conversation. These problems are caused by the volume of calls to and from the Practice exceeding the available telephone capacity. The surgery has this in hand and are waiting for BT Openreach to give them a quote to increase their bandwidth so that the phone system works more efficiently.

The above is the situation for GP access—for now.



STAFFING AT THE WARRENS

Prior to the onset of the pandemic in the UK, the NHS was already experiencing stress and over demand. Waiting lists have long been an issue whereby the demand for medical procedures and appointments outstripped supply.

Also before the pandemic, the number of GPs across the UK that worked wholly in GP practice-based settings had been steadily decreasing, as many GPs chose to split their week between a variety of settings. At the same time, the number of GPs choosing to work some degree of part-time had been climbing – often as a result to better manage their own stress levels and improve their own quality of life.

So, when the impacts of the pandemic arrived on top of this national decline in GP provision, it made an already difficult situation even more difficult.

And everyone has been feeling the effects of all this change.

West Wirral Group Practice at The Warrens has approximately 14,000 registered patients and 8.5 equivalent whole time GPs, which equates to over 1,647 patients per GP.

In addition to GPs, the WWGP medical team includes a range of office and reception staff, and other practitioners including Practice Nurses, Health Care Assistants, an Advanced Nurse Practitioner, Paramedic, Social Prescriber and Clinical Pharmacist that all help to provide a wide range of services to its patients.

Medical teams (and patients) have had to adjust to new ways of working. Staff at The Warrens have had to put in place procedures that had not existed before Covid, and not everything has been at the Practice's discretion.

In order to reduce the risk of virus transmission, the medical teams have had to restrict the numbers of patients attending the surgery and establish ways of making the best use of the limited number of face-to-face (F2F) GP appointments possible.

Limits to the number of F2F appointments has meant many other patient/doctor consultations have had to be done through alternative methods, adding extra pressure as both sides adapt to new ways of working. Not ideal for either party; but satisfactory in most cases.

Additional pressure has now also been put on Receptionists to help provide a triage service to determine if a patient can be safely seen, or contacted by a nurse or supported by another member of the surgery staff rather than a doctor; therefore, ensuring doctors' time is allocated where most needed.

Amongst all of this, the necessary use of technology has seen an exponential rise. It is likely to remain part of our 'new normal' whether we like it or not.

Having to adapt to these new ways of working naturally causes problems. Patients can make their opinions heard, but it has also been problematic for surgery staff alike who have to get on with it. They have had to learn how to operate new computer systems and deal with the inevitable 'bugs' that seem to beset new (and disparate) technologies.

The online e-Consult system, once heralded as a helpful tool for GPs and convenient for patients, is now causing its own problems (as described more fully in 'GP Access').

Perhaps because it's a victim of its own success, e-Consult has resulted in GPs being overwhelmed by huge numbers of online consultation requests.

This has often meant that GPs have had to work well beyond contracted hours (for no extra pay) to ensure they are all dealt with. However, such has been the number of eConsults, restrictions on its availability have had to be introduced so that GPs can cope and submissions can be more safely managed.

Additionally, as we have explained, the spacing of chairs in surgeries limits the number of patients who can be accommodated in the waiting area at any one time.

Other challenges being faced by staff at the Warrens include the need for staff from all departments to work at the Woodchurch Covid-19 Vaccination Centre, which has meant they are not able to be at the surgery as they would have been, doing their normal jobs.

As well this, the Practice's staff have had to extend the flu vaccine programme to include people aged over 50 — again requiring extra work and changes to normal routines.

The current situation is not ideal, but the Practice is doing its best to manage resources to provide support and care to the maximum number of patients possible. All these individual issues amass and have accumulative impacts, causing a constant need for continual changes as situations develop.

It is understandable that all these changes and new processes have not always run smoothly; but through everything, the staff at all levels at The Warrens are trying to do their best whilst dealing with greatly increased workloads and constant change.

Despite this, sadly, they are also feeling the effects of ceaseless criticism and abuse despite their best endeavours. Under such circumstances, something has to give.

Practice staff are not immune. Every week in the last 18-months there have been members of staff absent from work suffering from Covid or having to self isolate. They have also increasingly been falling sick with burn-out, exhaustion and stress. If not ill, some have become so fed up that they have left the Practice altogether. And trying to recruit skilled people wanting to step into such working conditions is increasingly difficult. As is finding locum doctors to step in when GPs are off sick.

Any absence or reduction from the already overstretched workforce will make worse the difficulties being experienced, which, subsequently, could impact on patients. Thus it is crucial that staff stay well, otherwise, the situation will only get worse. They are essential to the running of our GP Practice.

Current pressures have meant that some aspects of work, such as keeping the website up to date, have not had as much attention. The Practice acknowledges the website is important so that patients can find the information they want, including current covid and flu vaccine arrangements, so that they don't have to call or email the surgery and add to staff workloads. Staff will be addressing this as soon as possible.

Everyone can help by being respectful, understanding and patient with each other if things don't run smoothly or seem to be taking a long time.

The pandemic has had such an impact on the lives of everyone across the UK, we all need to play our part in finding our way through the months and, perhaps, years ahead.



KINDNESS

"I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel" – Maya Angelou

All our Practice Staff have been working extremely hard since Covid began in March 2020.

All of them are exhausted but still they are giving their all to patients.

The PPG has been appalled to hear that many staff at The Warrens have been getting abuse from a number of patients.

It is not only at The Warrens where this is happening. It appears to be happening in all sorts of settings all over the country. And they are not just isolated incidents: abuse in one form or another seems to be happening on a regular basis.

All of us are bound to be nervous and a bit "jittery" because of Covid. This was something new that none of us expected or knew anything about. We have all learned about it, in our own way, over the last 18 months or so. We have also had to learn to deal with the consequences of the pandemic: whether that be how we shop, go on holiday, meet family and friends, and communicate with our doctor.

And it is understandable that some people find all these changes and their impacts hard to deal with, but there is no excuse for unacceptable behaviour and disrespect.

Although some things have improved since March 2020 and the days of lockdown, we still seem to be a long way from how we would like things to be, and there is still this winter to get through.

In addition, it is likely to be a while before all the staff in the Practice can stop doing all the overtime and working all the hours they have been doing, and get back to a "normal" days' work.

There is, however, one thing that we, as patients, can do to help in some small but important way, and that is to be kind : not only to each other but also to all the Practice staff we have contact with, whether it be face to face, online or on the telephone. Maya Angelou's quote seems so relevant to this.

Kindness not only helps the person receiving it but it also benefits the person who is giving the kindness. We all know how it makes us feel when we are having a bad day if someone is kind to us.

In most instances, we don't know what is going on in another person's life but being kind to each other can lead to a much nicer day for both parties.

Think how good it feels when someone is kind to you and how you feel when you are kind to someone else, and please use that and show some kindness to the Practice staff, no matter who they are, because they are all trying to help you whilst working in extremely difficult situations.



Constructive feedback can be emailed to the PPG at ppg.wwgp@gmail.com