

Meon Medical Centre Update

The commonest complaint heard in the media about GPs at the moment is that they are not seeing patients, so I'd like to explain what is happening here at Meon Medical Centre.

Throughout the pandemic we have been told to try to minimise the number of patients that we are seeing face to face and to limit any unnecessary contact. We were told to bring in telephone triage – which we did as soon as the first lockdown began – something that both patients and us as clinicians had to learn to manage. This advice still stands as although the restrictions have lifted, as we all know, cases are still rising and by necessity we often do need to bring down vulnerable patients to the surgery.

Throughout though we have continued to see patients face to face. Our nurses in particular have seen patients face to face to continue to offer services of blood taking and dressings and injections – all things that can't be done over the phone. The GPs have triaged every request for an appointment and continued to bring patients down to the surgery if there is a clinical need to examine them.

As the restrictions have eased we trialled having appointments available for people to book directly for face to face appointments but have found it difficult to manage as sometimes the appointments booked do not need an examination and could have been done over the phone. We have also found that people have “stacked up” their problems and expect us to deal with several problems within a 10 minute consultation. The result is that the waiting room can get full with people waiting who perhaps didn't need to come to the surgery, which has been unnecessary.

So – what have we done? We are constantly reviewing our appointment system to try to make it as efficient as possible. If you look at our website there is the opportunity to send in a request for an online or econsultation. The best problems to be dealt with using this method are simple queries that can be resolved with an electronic reply, for example medication queries, requests for advice, or administrative queries about fit notes or reports. We do offer directly bookable face to face consultations for problems that will obviously need an examination – for example a new lump, however we have decided to continue to triage all other appointment requests before offering a face to face consultation.

The other common media story is about the pressure that GPs are under. We too are finding the demand significantly higher than I have ever known it before. I know that everyone is frustrated, some are even angry about the impact of the pandemic. A lot of routine hospital appointments were cancelled, operations were postponed, people were lost to follow up and often they need their GP to re-refer them. This adds to our workload at a time when we are trying to deal with our own backlog of routine reviews that were all cancelled through the pandemic. In addition a lot of people didn't consult us during the pandemic and now want several different problems dealt with when they get an appointment with us. Often this is not possible to fit into a 10 minute consultation, which then increases frustration, makes us run late and adds pressure to both waiting patients and also to the GP themselves.

To add to the challenges we are facing, you may have heard that there is a worldwide shortage of blood bottles. As a result we are having to defer all routine blood tests at the moment until 20th September. We are unsure what happens at that point but some people may be asked to defer their blood test appointments as we prioritise those blood tests that are clinically urgent.

Finally – we wanted to update you regarding the flu clinic and covid boosters. As I'm sure you are aware from the media (who actually often find out the information earlier than we do!), the

recommendations from the JCVI are still outstanding. Initially we were told that the recommendation was likely to be that the flu boosters and covid boosters were given together and that all over 50's would need a booster and we were asked to start planning for this. Once again we joined forces with our neighbouring practices and we were planning to start offering the booster programme from September 27th.

There are now as you may be aware several obstacles: firstly, nationally, we have been told that our flu vaccine deliveries are likely to be delayed by up to 2 weeks, and secondly we still don't know who will be eligible for a covid booster or if they can be administered at the same time as the flu jab or if there has to be a gap – or indeed how long the gap needs to be!

What we do know though is that regardless of the covid booster we will be offering flu clinics as soon as we can guarantee we have the vaccines ourselves likely to be end of September, early October together with the other two practices in our Primary Care Network – Shipston and Wellesbourne – at Ettington Village Hall. If we get the go-ahead to start the covid boosters at the same time then the plans change again. We will keep everyone informed via our website as soon as we know the details.