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Rt Hon Paul Burstow

Chair, Hertfordshire and West Essex ICB

Charter House

Parkway

Welwyn Garden City

AL8 6JL

Dear Mr Burstow

I am Chair of the Dacorum Health Action Group, which is made up of local residents campaigning for better healthcare in the Borough of Dacorum.

We are increasingly concerned at the failure of some primary care providers, particularly GPs, to provide a satisfactory level of service to patients in Dacorum. There is evidence that a number of our GP practices are unable to maintain the necessary standards of access and, at times, of care.

At the end of this letter is a selection of some of the experiences with GPs reported to us in recent weeks, mostly from Hemel Hempstead. This evidence was gathered on social media, but I am convinced that it is credible. The evidence we have seen suggests that some practices attract considerably more criticism than others. This wide apparent variation in standards of care and access is concerning and unacceptable.

I understand very well the increasing demands on the NHS, both the acute sector and primary care. I also understand that GPs are in short supply. But a number of issues need to be addressed without delay.

Some common problems were identified by patients:

* Difficulty in making appointments, especially for older people;
* The feeling that telephone appointments are not as effective as face-to-face appointments;
* Online consultation systems which can be hard to navigate and are not always used efficiently by practices;
* The recent weakening of the role of the GP as an enabler of access to NHS services and an advocate for the patient in the NHS. People can feel unsupported, especially when they have been used to having their own GP;
* Doubts about the value of the wider range of health professionals now employed by practices, from physician associates to podiatrists. Practices are not always good at explaining the role and value of such professionals;
* The new appointments-only system for blood tests at hospitals in West Hertfordshire is rather unpopular and seems to have increased the burden on some GP practices.

The Care Quality Commission is clearly struggling in its regulatory role. Several Dacorum practices, for instance, last had a full inspection seven years ago. A lot has changed since then.

The current situation shows that the aims of the Primary Care Network system are very far from being achieved. The NHS website states:

***PCNs build on existing primary care services and enable greater provision of proactive, personalised, coordinated and more integrated health and social care for people close to home. Clinicians describe this as a change from reactively providing appointments to proactively caring for the people and communities they serve.***

The PCNs seem to be failing in some cases in Dacorum to deliver on these promises. Practices are at times unable even to succeed in ‘reactively providing appointments’, and in Dacorum some are very far indeed from ‘proactively caring for the people and communities they serve’. Judging by the evidence of their own patients, the worst practices seem to be unable to learn from the best in the same Borough.

As the ICB has overall responsibility for the NHS in the area, I would be grateful if you could:

1. Explain what the ICB is doing to tackle the problems with GP services in Dacorum
2. Review the working of the PCN system in Dacorum to see whether it is meeting its objectives, identifying both areas for improvement and examples of good practice
3. Meet with a number of those most affected by failures of access and care by their GP practices. The meeting would also be attended by patients who feel that their practice is handling the current difficulties well.

I hope you will agree that this is a practical and positive way forward which should help improve the situation in Dacorum’s GP practices.

**Yours**

**Philip Aylett**

**Chair**

**Dacorum Health Action Group**

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**COMMENTS ON GP SERVICES FROM PATIENTS AND CARERS LIVING IN DACORUM**

**Appointments not available promptly/systems make no sense**

* **This comment made on 5 April:** Severe shoulder pain...I phoned the surgery ..'We have no appointments'...what nothing? ....not until after 17th April that’s when we book the next batch....but I can hardly lift a kettle! We open our books on a Wednesday every two weeks...so if you are ill on a Tuesday or Wednesday, that’s fine...but get sick on a Thursday and you have to wait two weeks. Who in God’s name thought up this crazy system???!!
* Tried to contact my surgery online yesterday. But they've changed the look of the site and the method of contact. Tried for an hour and gave up. Old is the problem here. Husband had to go to surgery today, so asked him if he could make an appointment for me. Response: 'You can't make an appointment for someone else.' Husband said: 'But what if that someone was unable to make an appointment themselves?' Same reply: 'You can't make an appointment for someone else.' Expect I'll try online again tomorrow. Can't stand hours of music continually interrupted by: 'You are twelfth in the queue.'
* Over 70 never had a [Health] MOT, saw doctor about medication that did not agree with me and he asked no questions. Before all this, I would be asked a general set of questions on every visit. How is your sleep, have you lost any weight, how is your appetite, etc. which gave the doctor a general overview of my condition. Not any more. They now appear to be so rushed, they just want you gone.
* I had an outbreak of shingles on my face. Called the GP and advised to do an e-consult. That came back with a message in red saying I must speak to someone today. Called the surgery and the receptionist did a mini e-consult over the phone (not allowed to do anything else). Got a phone call from the GP three days later! I needed acyclovir straight away. Not three days later. Fortunately I went on-line and found a pharmacy that would supply acyclovir for delivery the next day - but only because I had to lie and say I had genital herpes. Go figure.
* In spite of having some results that needed urgent medical attention I had to wait four weeks for my results appointment … It concerns me and so many others that with more housing being built in the area matters will only get worse. It feels like no one listens anymore.
* Complete and utter shambles. My wife is over 70 tried to get an appointment, has to wait three weeks. You get comments like if you feel really ill go straight to A and E. That's why they are completely full. In my opinion GPs are not pulling their weight and the whole system needs restructuring.
* The worst part is you can never get an appointment. I have rung for 11 days several times through the day without success. If you go to surgery we are told to ring for an appointment - madness....
* Waiting on phone for sometimes up to an hour to get appointments then told Dr will ring you but that could be up to two weeks away. My friend in Suffolk gets to see Dr same day as ringing
* I have been with the same surgery since moving to Hemel over 30yrs ago. I have always been very satisfied with mine and my families care but am very disappointed with how things are deteriorating. Under the new system of appointments only

being available on a day to day basis I have been unable after 4 attempts to get an appointment and each time have been told to go to urgent care.

* Whilst I have found it difficult to get a soon appointment with my GP I have found very quick response to the NHS app "contact your GP about a health problem". On two occasions I have had a response within the hour, including a prescription sent to my nominated pharmacy.

**Phone appointments don’t work**

* Phone appointments don’t work for a lot of people. My daughter is type 1 diabetic. Waiting for blood test results. She also works in a busy school. Was given an eight-hour window for a phone call from GP. She couldn’t sit static, phone in hand waiting for call. Phone rang off after six rings while she was trying to pick up. No call back. This has happened on a few occasions. GP records will say it’s my daughter’s fault for not answering. It’s not good enough at all.

**Blood test system doesn’t work**

* For us as a family living with rheumatoid arthritis, which we need two monthly blood tests done. It was so easy to just walk into hospital and get tests done. Now it is impossible to book three appointments one after the other online. So we have tried our surgery but they are annoyed that so many people are now asking them for blood tests. So don't want to be bothered.
* The new appointment only system at the Blood Clinic is farcical. It took over a week to get an available time slot but when I went I attended the place was empty and there were 3 phlebotomists sitting around doing nothing!!!

**Poor diagnosis**

* I have been a nurse for the past 42 yrs .My husband was in a lot of pain with a severe rash on his upper thigh I knew straight away it was shingles , could not get a GP appt at all told to call back Wed for appt, I went to 111 who organised the appt that afternoon to see GP , we arrived at surgery and were seen by a paramedic and advised he had a severe attack of bed bugs!!, she refused to listen to any other information I wished to advise her and was told to get some cream. I managed to get a GP appt elsewhere and shingles was diagnosed immediately and by this time it had spread onto his face.

**E-consult (online consultation platform)**

* Econsult is terrible. I was asked by my GP’s receptionist to fill in a separate econsult for each symptom, when I phoned to discuss a worsening of my condition which was concerning to me. People simply need to sit down with a GP and talk it through sometimes and that option had been abruptly taken away on the NHS, at my surgery anyway. It is not good for patients and is not even efficient for the NHS as patients will try again or go to 111 or if they have to, go to a private GP which I think is the intention or at least not a consideration for NHS GPs. The human element is very important when people are ill but we have been reduced to a series of tickboxes by a remote machine.

**Practice staff other than doctors**

* I would like to know as an ex-nurse who worked for the NHS for 40 years how many health associates and physicians with no medical knowledge but a degree in banking going to diagnose patients?
* You need to be able to get through to the doctors to make an appointment, if you do not ring dead on 8 am you have no chance of getting one because when you do eventually get through you are told all appointments are now gone try again tomorrow. If you do get through you should not have to discuss your medical needs with a receptionist, but get an actual appointment with a real doctor not an imposter and then not be passed to a physio for another three month wait. Absolutely disgusting

**Selection of comments posted on nextdoor, April 2024**

**Dacorum Health Action Group**