

Your Health

Update for patients and the public in Berkshire West
(Includes West Berkshire, Wokingham and Reading)



June 2021

Welcome to this special edition of 'Your Health' in which we turn the spotlight on the way primary care has changed during Covid and look at the new ways of working in our local surgeries and Primary Care Networks (PCNs). We also introduce you to some of the new healthcare professionals who are working in the community, bringing services closer to people's homes, making them easier to access and enhancing the facilities and treatments available to them. We'll be profiling other health professionals you can access through our PCN in future editions of this newsletter.

Surgeries provide phone, video and face-to-face service

Covid has placed, and continues to place, huge pressures on primary care services as staff work flat out to deal with patients' concerns around the pandemic and Covid vaccinations as well as dealing with the day to day needs of other poorly people.

Practices have had to adapt swiftly to the challenges posed by the pandemic in a bid to keep patients, staff and wider communities safe and prevent the spread of the virus. This has meant the introduction of some changes and now, as we ease out of lockdown, the surgeries will be keeping some of these new ways of working. That doesn't mean face to face appointments won't be on offer in appropriate cases. But triaging people when they first contact their surgery is now routine so staff can make sure callers are helped by the right person at the right time.

Triage is carried out by a specially trained member of the reception staff who will ask a few questions so they can decide how best to deal with the caller's query. The reception staff are bound by a professional code of practice so all information is treated in confidence. In many cases it might be decided that the GP isn't the most appropriate person to deal with the patient and it will be passed to one of the other highly trained healthcare professionals now employed at practices.

Triage may then be followed up by a virtual assessment on the phone or via a video link and this would be conducted by the most appropriate healthcare professional. However, clinicians know that a one-size-fits-all approach to virtual consulting isn't suitable for all patients so face to face consultations are always on offer in the appropriate cases. Chronic conditions such as diabetes and asthma will still be regularly reviewed and, again, these consultations may be carried out via telephone, video or face to face depending on the patient's needs.

Dr Rupa Joshi, a GP at the Woodley Centre Surgery and Co-Clinical Director of Wokingham North Primary Care Network, said: "GP practices have been open for business throughout the pandemic but inevitably we've had to alter the way we do some of our work. The move towards greater use of technology has been generally welcomed by patients but I would like to reassure people that their GPs will always be available for face to face consultations where appropriate.



"Often though, another healthcare professional at the surgery may be best placed to speak to for certain health conditions or presentations, and there may be less of a wait" Dr Joshi added.

The experience of one Berkshire West patient sums up the benefits of having swift access to such a wide range of experts within each practice: “Recently when I felt unwell, I was pleased to speak to my GP quickly and get advice and reassurance over the phone. At the GPs request, the reception team then booked me in to see the practice nurse so I could get my bloods checked, and my doctor followed up with results and necessary treatment over the phone. I was able to collect my prescription directly from the pharmacy. The pandemic has changed life for us all, and I’m happy to know that my GP team are doing what they need to do to keep us safe.”

Physician Associates – here’s what they do

One of the new band of professionals now working in healthcare are Physician Associates (PAs) and in Berkshire West a new pilot is running which will see more PAs placed in primary care settings taking on a range of duties normally covered by GPs or medics in hospitals. The aim is to speed up treatment for appropriate patients and ease pressure on GPs so they are freed up to deal with more complex and urgent cases.

Patients benefit from easier access to the clinical expertise of a PA and can receive specialist care and procedures closer to their homes. The PA input into primary care will improve the continuity of care for patients and provide a more streamline service.

PAs have to complete five years intensive training which includes 1,600 hours of clinical placement and once qualified they are able to take on a range of key roles including:

- Conducting physical exams and diagnosing illnesses
- Managing acute and complex illnesses
- Performing diagnostic and therapeutic procedures
- Telephone triage/consultations
- Home/nursing home visits
- Acute and chronic referrals



Laura Taylor qualified as a PA in 2017 graduating from the University of Reading which is running a PA training course in partnership with the Royal Berkshire NHS Foundation Trust.

She said: “Sometimes people are a bit confused about our role. We are science graduates and have undertaken a further two years of Masters level training to become Physician Associates so are extremely well qualified to provide a wide range of medical and generalist healthcare. Certainly the patients I’ve worked with have valued our expertise and we are able to build up a very good rapport with them. We often have a little more time to get to know them better so we can fully understand not just their symptoms and conditions but the wider factors which influence their health and wellbeing.”

Social Prescribers offer a vital non-medical service in the surgery

Sometimes patients contacting the surgery don't need clinical support, they benefit more from someone with time to listen and gently suggest things they can do themselves to improve their health and wellbeing.

And this is where the role of Social Prescribers like Anthony Roots (pictured), comes to the fore. They are a key part of surgery teams and can help patients struggling with stress brought on by worries over work, money, housing and family. There are many community based support services available but sometimes it's hard to know where to start and this is where the Social Prescribers can help, pointing people in the direction of the right help at the right time. And if they can't find a support network out there, then they can contribute to local discussions around the development or commissioning of services to fill the gap.



The Social Prescribers work closely with their clinical colleagues and act as their 'eyes and ears' to better understand what is happening for the patient when people are concerned or have anxieties and worries that often don't get talked about during a clinical consultation.

Anthony, who is based at Thatcham Health Centre, said: "The magic of the work is time and listening. When people share their thoughts they hear themselves and then their thoughts or feelings become more real and we can then start discussing practical issues and approaches.

"Patients do need to bring a willingness to engage and they are often soon able to self-manage their problems and are very capable of following through things we discuss. And for those who are not yet ready to use our engagement, they can at least use it as a stepping stone," he said.

"Our GPs, nurses and other professionals manage a person's clinical health but aren't always able to assist with the non-clinical issues which may impact on health. The value of my role is to enhance the resources available to the surgery. The GP and nurse time is taken for appointments whilst I can ease some of their workloads when it's a non-clinical issue," added Anthony.

Patient Participation Groups (PPGs) – a key player in the practice teams

The other 'eyes and ears' of a practice belong to the Patient Participation Groups (PPG) who are the two-way link between surgery staff and patients. Clinicians use PPGs to help them engage with patients if they want feedback on services or are keen to introduce new initiatives or different ways of working. And patients can contact their PPG rep to raise their suggestions or concerns around surgery facilities.

Whilst they've always been a key part of practice teams, the PPGs have come into their own during the pandemic. Many volunteered at vaccination sites, marshalling traffic, directing patients, maintaining social distanced queues and supporting those who were nervous. And PPG reps were often the 'go to' person in their community when people needed updates around their surgery's operations during lockdown.



Shirley Cullup joined the Mortimer Surgery PPG in 2016 and was voted in as Chair a year later. It's a thriving group of 12 people including three pupils from Willink School - a challenge for most PPGs is to develop a diverse membership that is truly representative of the area they serve. The group meets nine times a year, and has kept in touch via emailed newsletters during the pandemic.

Before Covid the group hosted four educational evenings which covered issues like diabetes, dementia and mental health awareness and included Q&A sessions with their local doctors and other specialists.

Shirley, a former counsellor/psychotherapist for HM Prisons, said she had gained big benefits from being part of the PPG. "I've had a valuable insight into how a surgery functions, I understand the pressures the staff are working under and am able to feedback this to our local community who then have a greater appreciation of the challenges facing our local clinicians.

"I've made new friends and get personal satisfaction from doing something worthwhile for others," added Shirley.

“I believe we have many challenges coming out of Covid and that the PPG can really play a part in supporting both the surgery and patients during this next period. We need to look at how we build people’s confidence again, many have forgotten how to do simple things like shopping or driving. Some people have not left home except to walk their dog and there has been a complete lack of companionship.

“We may all need time to learn to live a slightly different life now to look towards a clearer future and also to be able to say ‘it’s ok not to be ok, you are not alone’. There’s going to be a lot of extra pressure on the NHS as people struggle with this new life and I want people to know about the support their local PPG can provide,” added Shirley.

“And if anyone reading this thinks they could support the work of their local group I’d urge them to get involved.”

Two people who have done just that are John Bagshaw and Eddy Holweger:

John is no stranger to health as he’s a public governor at the RBH and a member of the West Berkshire Patient Panel. “I value the NHS highly as do most UK citizens and we want to see patients get the best possible service from it, regardless of their circumstances, ethnicity or religion,” he said. “It’s very useful for GPs to know how their patients perceive them, what it’s like to be a patient and how to make their experience as smooth and pleasant as possible while being effective in prevention as well as diagnosis and treatment of disease.”

Eddy said: “I joined the PPG with the expectation of the satisfaction I would get from being able to contribute something useful to the local community especially where health is concerned. As an octogenarian it makes me happy to be still able to fill some spare time helping others.”

Bringing mental health care closer to communities

The issue of mental health has come to the fore during the pandemic as people struggle to deal with worries around jobs, education, finances and protection from the virus. And for people with a history of mental health difficulties, Covid has put extra pressure on their troubled minds.

In a bid to improve and make mental health services easier to access, a pilot is being run in Berkshire West with Primary Care Mental Health (PCMH) teams being placed in Primary Care Networks (PCNs). They will be a first port of call within local communities for people with mental health worries and the teams will have access to the wide range of support available and it’s hoped their expertise and knowledge of what’s on offer means people can get directed to the right help and treatment at the right time.

Five PCN sites are due to pilot the scheme over the next 12 months with plans to widen it across the whole of Berkshire West by 2024. The priorities of the PCMH work are:

- Ensuring people get a timely, personalised and choice-based service which is aimed at keeping them healthy in their own community and supporting their recovery and wellbeing
- Creating a robust partnership with key health, social care, voluntary and community sector organisations which advises people on the best place to go for help
- Strengthening the collaboration between a wide range of organisations, people and communities
- Creating supportive mental health infrastructure within PCNs and communities



The University PCN in Reading is piloting the scheme. Clinical Director Dr Elizabeth Johnson (pictured) said: “We are pleased to be a part of this pilot as the PCN has been assigned an experienced Mental Health worker for 2 days a week from the local Mental health trust. They take referral from GPs and patients can access appointments directly too. They also work closely with the PCN Social Prescribers to enable the patient to be supported more fully in their health and wellbeing “

Digital Champions who don't talk 'tech'!

To make sure as many people as possible are able to access and benefit from an online consultation, work is in hand to extend the network of Digital Champions. These people help others to become more digitally connected at a pace that works for them. The champions, from all ages and walks of life, can explain technology to those who are new or nervous when it comes to using IT. They can get people connected to IT networks, answer questions and be a guiding hand to the less tech savvy members of the community.

The CCG has teamed up with key partners including the Voluntary Sector, Age UK, libraries, local councils and Healthwatch to run the scheme. They are keen to make sure their work reaches groups who are sometimes hard to make contact with, including the homeless, refugees, asylum seekers, anyone who has English as a second language, people at risk of social isolation, adults with a physical or learning disability, those living with long-term health conditions and people overcoming addictions, domestic abuse and mental health issues.

Kamal Bahia (pictured), who is leading the Digital Champions work said: “we really want to help those patients who would like to become digitally able in managing their healthcare particularly when accessing primary care. Some people may be able to do basic things on their phones and laptops whilst others may need a bit more of a helping hand and that's where our Champions can really help. They make everything very easy to understand and are happy to spend time answering questions and really making sure people are comfortable using their IT to access primary care.

“If anyone would like to know more about the Digital Champions then please contact me on kamalbahia@nhs.net and I'm very happy to help,” added Kamal.



NHS App – it's easy to install and use

The NHS App is a simple and safe way to access a range of NHS services on your phone or tablet. Through the app, you can get health advice, order repeat prescriptions, view your GP health record, and – in case of selected GP practices – message your surgery.



Here's a very simple guide to accessing the App, and details of the information you need to have to hand to get you started. Remember, it's free to download it on Google Play (for Android users) and Apple app (for iPhone/iPad users) stores. Once you've downloaded it, you will need to set up an NHS login and prove who you are – this may include providing your email address, phone number, name, date of birth and postcode. The app then securely connects to information from your GP surgery.

To be able to access all features on the app you may be required to confirm your identity by providing photo ID such as passport, UK driving license (full or provisional), European driving license, or European national identity card. It can take up to 7 days to confirm these details and receive full access, so it's best to get yourselves on the App now before you need to use it.

From baby jabs to long term complex cases, Practice Nurses lead the way

General Practice Nurses (GPNs) are familiar faces in all surgeries and have been a mainstay in primary care for many years. But what's probably not so familiar is the huge range of work they cover.

On top of the essential services they provide around wound care, injections, baby immunisations, cytology and health promotion, many are now central in helping patients manage long term conditions like diabetes, respiratory illnesses and cardiovascular disease. Their role also covers physical health checks with patients with a Learning Disability or severe mental health issues, specialised women's and men's healthcare, managing complex patient cases.

Practice nurses who have undertaken appropriate training can also prescribe medications and those who want to further their training can achieve Advanced Practice level which gives them even greater skills in clinical assessment and diagnostic reasoning.

Allwin Mercer, from the Boathouse Surgery in Pangbourne, said “The role of nurses within primary care continues to evolve to meet the ever increasing need of the patients. As key members of the practice’s multi-disciplinary teams, we see all the aspects of a patient’s journey, support them through their illnesses, and get to know and understand them. This enables us to build good relationships and helps us tailor the care we provide to each individual. Particularly with patients with Long Term Conditions (LTC) where self-management of care is often encouraged.”

Pharmacists take on wider responsibilities for patient care at surgery

If you thought the practice pharmacists were just there to process your prescription and dish out Disprins, then think again! Ida Osei is one of the new breed of advanced practice pharmacists, highly trained professionals who provide complex clinical support and work side-by-side with doctors to run a range of clinics.

Ida, who is based at the Balmore Park Surgery in Caversham, has been an advanced practice pharmacist for three years. She provides vital support to people with long term and multiple conditions like asthma, hypertension and COPD (lung conditions like bronchitis) and runs acute clinics treating patients with conditions like minor skin infections, urinary tract infections, sore throats and other less urgent but problematic conditions which would otherwise need to be treated by a doctor.



More recently, pharmacists have played a key role in supporting practices with Covid vaccinations - either vaccinating patients or providing medicines information to patients and clinical colleagues.

“I can deal with up to 20 appointments a day assessing, examining, diagnosing and treating patients and easing pressure on the other health professionals at the practice. A large part of this work is around making sure patients, many who have been on various medicines for a long time, are on the correct dosage, that they take their medication as prescribed, are not experiencing any side effects, have a good understanding of why they take their medication and address any concerns they may have with their medication.

“As patients get older we may need to review their medication to ensure their medicines are safe, effective and the medicines do not increase their risks of for example falls or adverse effects,” said Ida.

“I also do a lot of peer support and mentoring with other pharmacists who are new to general practice. Pharmacists are a key element in the running of general practices with a wide range of clinical experience coupled with invaluable knowledge about our patients and their healthcare needs,” she added.

High Street pharmacists also offer valuable healthcare support



Remember that pharmacists on your local high street are also qualified healthcare professionals and can offer clinical advice and over the counter medicines for a range of minor illnesses like coughs, sore throats, an upset tummy, diarrhoea and other aches and pains.

They have all been trained for five years in the use of medicines along with management of minor illnesses and providing health and wellbeing advice. And if they think your symptoms suggest it’s something more serious, pharmacists are trained to make sure you get the help you need.

Many have a private room where you can talk in confidence. Many are open until late and at weekends and you don’t need an appointment. So for really quick and easy access to advice, remember the pharmacist who is literally on your doorstep.

Feeling unwell?

Know where to go

 <p>Self care</p> <p>Be prepared to care for yourself with medicines at hand and plenty of rest</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - cough or cold - upset stomach - pain or headache - cuts and grazes - sore throat <p>For health advice, visit www.nhs.uk</p>	 <p>Pharmacist</p> <p>Ask for advice on ailments, medicines and healthier living</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - queries about medication dosage, type or suitability plus urgent requests or if related to hospital discharge - repeat prescription - sore eyes (but if persists go to optician) - runny nose - diarrhoea - bite or sting 	 <p>Call NHS 111 or go online at 111.nhs.uk</p> <p>When the situation is not life-threatening</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - if you think you need to go to hospital - if you don't know the most suitable place to go or call a GP to call or if your GP practice is closed - if you need advice or reassurance about what to do <p>Available 24 hours a day, every day</p>	 <p>GP practice</p> <p>Use patient access online or make an appointment if an illness or injury won't go away</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - repeat prescription - urgent skin problem such as a rash that is spreading - ear pain - back ache <p>Additional evenings and weekend appointments bookable through your GP practice.</p> <p>Due to coronavirus, most GP appointments are currently taking place by phone. Patients will be called in for a face-to-face consultation if necessary.</p>	 <p>Ask A&E</p> <p>Thinking of going to Accident and Emergency but not sure if you need to? Before taking the time and having the stress of going to hospital, why not use our online symptom checker? Ask A&E offers you rapid NHS answers you can trust to help you decide what to do next based on the seriousness of your symptoms and the urgency of your illness.</p> <p>www.royalberkshire.nhs.uk/ask.htm</p>	 <p>Emergency department or call 999</p> <p>Only for very serious or life-threatening situations</p> <p>If you are unsure, call NHS 111 or go on-line at 111.nhs.uk</p>	 <p>Mental health</p> <p>Aged between 11-19 years old? Visit KODOT.com for free, anonymous and confidential online counselling and emotional well-being support service.</p> <p>If you are over 18 and need urgent support call NHS 111 who will direct you accordingly.</p> <p>Call 0300 365 2000 to make a self-referral to Talking Therapies.</p> <p>Call the Common Point of Entry on 0300 365 0300 if your concern is more urgent.</p> <p>If you need someone to talk to, call the Samaritans free on 116 123 (24 hours a day, 365 days a year).</p> <p>In an emergency, or if someone is in immediate danger, call 999 straight away.</p>
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Register your mobile for the 999 SMS service by texting 'Register' to 999. Visit www.patientnon.co.uk/nhs111 to access NHS 111 with a British Sign Language interpreter

Take a photo and save to your phone 