

RCGP Brief: Oral Question on the logistical difficulties of getting a GP appointment and its impact on patient care and choice.

Overview

General practice is the cornerstone of the NHS, carrying out 370 million consultations last year. GPs and their teams have been through a significant period of evolution over the past few years including expanding multidisciplinary teams, at-scale collaboration and finding innovative ways to manage and deliver care.

Despite rising pressures and one of the most challenging winters on record, GPs and their teams are working harder than ever to see record numbers of patients on the same day of booking an appointment, whilst the number of patients having to wait a week or more for an appointment has significantly dropped when compared to pre-pandemic levels.

We need an expanded GP workforce with the right skills, tools and premises to improve patient care and access, reduce health inequalities, ensure patient safety, and give GPs more time to care for their patients. At the same time, the quality of care a patient receives should not be compromised for speed of access to a GP.

The present crisis

General practice is under immense pressure:

- 27.1 million appointments were carried out by GPs in December 2022, compared with 20.7 million appointments in December 2018.
- Whilst the number of appointments continue to grow each year, the number of FTE GPs has dropped by 1,808 since 2015.ⁱ
- 24% of GPs who responded to the Royal College of General Practitioners 2022 winter survey, reported that their practice was in danger of closing because of unmanageable workload and rising demands.

Workforce and workload challenges are an overwhelming factor that contribute to difficulties for patients in accessing care. Years of under-investment in general practice and the chronic shortage of GPs and other members of the practice team means that without urgent action from politicians, the ability of general practice to meet patients' needs is in jeopardy.

There are also too many inefficiencies with GP infrastructure and in the system which are wasting doctors' time and making it harder to give patients the care they need. In some practices, this looks like outdated technology - in our recent survey of GPs, around half said that their PC or laptop software was not acceptable.

ⁱ <https://digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/general-and-personal-medical-services>

Patient need and choice

As part of the GP Patient Survey 2022, 71.9% of patients said they were satisfied with the appointment they were offered the last time they tried to book oneⁱⁱ. GPs have an important role to play in determining the best mode of attention for patients, according to their personal and health circumstances. Decisions about consultation mode should be shared between the patient and their GP, in line with individual needs and circumstances of patients.

Shared decision making, person-centred care and empathy have a strong association with patient satisfaction, adherence to medical advice, positive changes in patient behaviours and, ultimately, patient outcomes. Similarly, we know that having the time and space to deliver good relational care supports higher job satisfaction for GPs.

The live data of Ask my GP allows observing what kind of appointment patients 'requested' and the mode of 'actual contact' with GPs. Data from August to December 2022 showsⁱⁱⁱ:

- The number of patients receiving a face-to-face appointment was 30.2% higher than the number of those that required one.
- Most of the patients who received a face-to-face appointment asked for a telephone consultation (44.8%).
- 14% of the patients receiving a face-to-face appointment requested just a message response.

Recommendations

- **A new recruitment and retention strategy** that allows us to go beyond the target of 6000 more GPs, backed by a £150 million annual GP retention fund, increasing the number of GP training places by at least 10% year on year, and changes to the current visa rules to make it easier for international GP trainees to stay and work in the UK
- **Improve the experience of accessing care**, making it easier for patients to choose to see the same GP or the next available member of the team, achieved through investing in better booking system and organisational development.
- **An NHS wide campaign to free up GPs** to spend more time with patients by cutting unnecessary workload and bureaucracy, including through a review of contractual requirements and improving coordination between primary and secondary care.
- **Allocate a bigger share of the NHS budget to general practice** to return funding to 11% of total health spend - with £1 billion additional investment in GP premises, more funding for practices serving deprived communities, and extra money for primary care networks to provide preventative care and promote population health.

ⁱⁱ england.nhs.uk/statistics/2022/07/14/gp-patient-survey-2022/

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://askmygp.uk/live/>