

E: publicaffairs@bma.org.uk

Rt Hon Matt Hancock MP

Secretary of State for Health and Social Care
Department of Health and Social Care
39 Victoria Street
London, SW1H 0EU

18 May 2021

Dear Secretary of State,

RE. Urgent meeting request - essential support needed for general practice

I write to express the widespread anger, frustration and disappointment of the general practice workforce and request an urgent meeting with you to discuss how the government can rapidly support general practice and its patients during the coming months.

It is beyond doubt that general practice is under unparalleled pressure, delivering a far greater number of consultations than at the same time two years ago. Demand for services has increased significantly through use of additional means of patient communication, including e-consultations, alongside responding to vaccination, shielding and COVID-19 issues. GPs and their teams have worked tirelessly to meet this need, alongside delivering COVID-19 vaccinations quickly and effectively, which has brought benefit for the whole nation. However, they are now also tackling the huge NHS backlog, all while GP recruitment and retention is nowhere near the levels needed.

Despite the incredible work done by GPs and their teams over the last year to care for our patients, practices and GP out-of-hours services do not feel supported by government or NHS England/ Improvement (NHSEI). This feeling is further exacerbated by sections of the media reporting that practices are to blame for not seeing all patients in face-to-face consultations. Practices have been open to their patients throughout the pandemic, and at least half of all appointments have been delivered in person. This is something that should be celebrated, but instead the profession has been badly let down, and become increasingly demoralised by the suggestion that they are failing their patients by following the government and NHSEI's guidelines and implementing triage so patients get the right care. As a result growing numbers of practices are reporting that their staff are being verbally, and at times physically threatened with abuse. We risk losing much needed and dedicated staff as a result. This is completely unacceptable and should be condemned by yourself, wider government and NHSEI in the strongest possible terms.explic

The NHSEI letter of 14 May shows a worrying disconnect with the reality facing general practice. Clinicians are delivering face-to-face appointments, but can only do so when it is safe for our



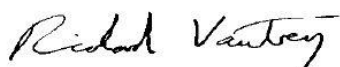
patients. Face-to-face consultations are at the heart of good general practice, but we need real and meaningful support to reduce the current unsustainable workload burden, rather than creating unrealistic expectations without the resources to deliver them. If the government's plans to remove the remaining lockdown restrictions and to facilitate a further increase in face-to-face appointments continue, as planned in June, then the government must urgently take significant steps to support practices at this critical time. The changes which must be made include:

- A clear statement from the CMO about when it is safe and appropriate to remove social distancing measures and when to use PPE for face-to-face consultations in GP premises.
- A major public campaign, that explicitly supports general practice, and honestly informs patients about the challenges impacting primary care.
- An end to directive letters, and instead practices and other GP services must be allowed to deliver patient care in the most appropriate manner, meeting the reasonable needs of their patients and based on their knowledge of their local communities.
- Commitment to fund premises development to improve ventilation and space in waiting areas, as well as to enable practices to implement measures to tackle climate change.
- Practices must not be the automatic default for patient queries which should be directed to hospital out-patient appointments systems. Wider NHS services must immediately put in place arrangements for patients waiting for appointments or procedures to contact them directly and secondary care services must also be enabled to send electronic prescriptions to community pharmacy and complete diagnostics independently of primary care.
- The £120 million funding to support practices, and funding for PCN clinical directors, must be increased and continued until general practice has recovered from the pandemic. QOF and other targets, including PCN DES specifications, should be suspended to enable practices to focus on delivering care to their patients who need them most.
- Rapidly implement measures to reduce the unnecessary bureaucratic burden still carried by practices, including ceasing routine CQC routine inspections and using the funding saved to reinvest in general practice.
- Remove the burden of VAT for general practice that is hampering collaborative working between practices at these challenging times, by making it more costly to recruit staff.
- Providing access to, and support from, mental wellbeing services for the general practice workforce. Continuing with the much more supportive form of annual appraisal and provide more support, including improved sick leave arrangements, for those in the general practice workforce including those impacted by Long COVID.

These are just some of the urgent steps we believe the government and NHSEI can and must take to support practices, other GP services and our dedicated workforce. Prolonged workload pressures are unsustainable and not safe or acceptable for either our workforce or our patients. We want to be able to provide the best possible service we can, but we need the government and NHSEI to bring an end to the criticism, and to properly support us in order to achieve this.

I look forward to your early reply and urgent meeting with you as a matter of priority to discuss these important matters further.

Yours sincerely



Dr Richard Vautrey
Chair, BMA General Practitioners Committee