

January 2008

Quality of Care and GP Opening Hours – Protecting the NHS

Dear Patient,

Your GP's surgery works hard to ensure that most patients can be seen as soon as possible, using the resources that are given to us by the Government.

We understand that many patients have to work and sometimes may struggle to get an appointment time that fits in with work and other commitments. At present, your GP surgery is contracted to provide services between 8 a.m. – 6.00 p.m. Monday to Friday and out of hours care is provided by your local Primary Care Organisation.

We work hard to ensure that those who need emergency appointments can see a doctor as soon as possible and satisfaction levels with GP services remain very high. Nationally eight out of ten patients say they are happy with current opening hours.

You may have read reports that GPs have refused to extend their opening hours for patients. In fact, the BMA, the doctors' trade union, has offered for GPs to work longer hours. However, we would not want patient care to suffer as a result of any changes. The Government is not offering any extra money for surgeries to open longer and we want to ensure that longer opening hours are properly funded. For this reason we currently remain opposed to the proposed changes.

This letter aims to explain why we think this, and why we are fearful that the Government may be using this issue to introduce further reforms, through the back door, that will affect patient care.

There are 250 million consultations with GPs in the UK every year. Most appointments are needed by elderly people, small children and patients with long term conditions. These patients require a high level of service during the day. **We believe it is a fundamental value of the NHS that those who need the care most, are most able to access a GP and support services.** If surgeries were to stay open for longer, and no extra money was made available for this, then we fear that there will be fewer appointments and resources available for these patients.

Although the Government may present their plans as 'patient friendly' or responding to 'consumer' demand, a GP service is not the same as a supermarket or a bank. We know that for our patients, quality is the most important concern, and that we will not offer our best service if we are continually undermined by reforms that do not offer real benefits to patients.

There is no benefit to patients of a surgery opening for longer if the quality of care is poorer, and the patients who need care most find it harder to get the appointments they need. We are concerned

that extended hours are an excuse for the Government in England to introduce large GP surgeries or polyclinics that may be run by multinational companies. GPs are very worried that this will put your local surgeries at risk.

GPs are fighting these reforms, as we do not believe they are right for us or for our patients. Ultimately these reforms could undermine the very basis of the NHS. The NHS is 60 this year, please help us protect it and keep it working for everyone, particularly those who need it most.

We need your support as your GP surgery, as you know it, is under threat. If you value your local surgery and the NHS please defend it by:

Writing to

- Writing to your Primary Care Organisation (Primary Care Trust in England and Health Board in Scotland, Northern Ireland, and Wales) telling them you do not agree with these changes and do not want them.
- Write to the local or national press telling them you are against these changes and why.
- Write to your MP and tell them how much you value your local surgery, do not want to lose the relationship with your family doctor and do not want to see the breakup of NHS general practice that this government is planning.

Thank you for taking the time to read this letter.

The BMA would like to know what you think of this letter. Please send any comments to savingyoursurgery@bma.org.uk