

HATHAWAY MEDICAL CENTRE AND THE USE OF 0844 NUMBERS

The fact that the Practice uses a non-geographic 0844 as its main telephone contact number for patients is a cause of concern to many of you. We think it would be helpful if we describe how this arrangement came about and what the future holds.

Like most surgeries we found that we received many complaints from patients about difficulty in making contact with us by telephone. We were so concerned about this that some years ago when we were using a geographic main telephone number, we asked BT, our service provider, to monitor incoming calls on our then two incoming lines. We found that on some peak days, as few as 7% calls were getting through on our appointments line in the busy early mornings.

We decided that we needed to do something about this and after a lot of research to establish what would be a cost effective solution including an unsuccessful attempt to persuade patients to avoid peak times when possible, we made the decision in 2007 to introduce a non geographic 0844 number. This enabled us to fund a more up to date system with an increased number of incoming lines. Contrary to popular belief we did not make this decision to generate revenue from this but to be able to significantly improve our telephone response without incurring excessive additional cost.

The use of 0844 numbers had been approved In 2004 when, in the face of much public criticism about the use of 0870 telephone numbers in the public sector including NHS facilities, the government banned outright the use of 0870 numbers requiring organisations to move to either a geographic telephone number or what was at the time a genuine “lo-call” non geographic number prefixed by 0844

When we made our decision to use an 0844 numbers this was accepted practise by the Government. At that time, before the widespread introduction of inclusive package tariffs and widespread use of mobile phones, the cost of calling an 0844 number compared favourably to a geographic number. We chose 0844 - discussed it extensively with our Patient Liaison Group, obtained their agreement - and introduced it when we moved into our new premises.

Moving to the new premises required us to sign long term contracts and the new Hathaway facility was brought into operation with 0844 4120023 as our primary means of contact. Since then we have done much to try and improve access to information about our facilities through an enhanced website, regular newsletters, notices and other publications designed to make it easy for patients to find out what they need to know. Whilst successful in this, demand

continues to grow. Our patient list size has grown by 2,000; telephone calls to the surgery ranges from 450 - 800 calls per day with days after a bank holiday being the busiest (770 calls were received on Tuesday 8 May); our busiest time of the day is still between 8 and 10am when we receive approximately 33% of our calls for the day; throughout the day an average of 66% of calls are answered within 7 seconds and only 7% of callers hang up before speaking to a member of staff once the call has been answered.

While these are a significant improvement on our previous ability to respond to the telephone traffic, we accept that they can still be improved.

The telecommunications industry has changed enormously since we introduced our telephone arrangements. The previously much maligned and expensive 0845 and 0870 numbers are now often included in widely available inclusive call packages and mobile phone users can often make “free” calls to other mobile numbers and geographic numbers as part of their contract. Meanwhile 0844 is no longer designated as “lo-call”, has increased in price on many call packages (although is still the same as a geographic number through BT) and is almost never included in an inclusive call package.

As a result, recently public criticism of bodies using contact telephone numbers that are not included in inclusive call telephone packages has increased. This is particularly the case in respect of NHS facilities where many people believe that everything should be free, even the telephone call. Ministers are sympathetic to these concerns and have continued to encourage organisations like ours to move away from 0844.

We would like to do this but we financial obligations that would make a change very expensive and could prejudice the high levels of service that we achieve currently through our 0844 number. Some surgeries have been able to change back to geographic numbers because they did not have time remaining on their contract. If in the future Government decides to mandate such changes then of course we will conform but in the meantime we believe that continuing the present arrangements is the best way of maintaining high standards of service to patients at least until our present contract with our telephone supplier runs out.

Meanwhile we will continue to try and make it easier for you to contact us - we will be conducting trials of the use of “Skype” where PC and some users of advanced mobile phones can make calls at zero cost; we are enhancing the website to make contact easier - our new repeat prescription service is already reducing calls in this respect - and we are encouraging use of e-mail and increasing the use of a “call back” facility and giving wider publicity to its availability.

Some patients believe that the Government had banned the use of 0844 numbers for GP practices; this is not the case. In 2012 a patient took his complaint, that we used an 0844 number, to the Parliamentary Health Ombudsman. This complaint was dismissed.

The partners are committed to returning to a geographic number in the second quarter of 2014.

We hope that this explains the reasons why Hathaway Medical Centre has an 0844 number as a primary means of telephone contact and apologise for the increase in call costs that some patients who are not with BT incur. We hope that the pilot of using Skype is successful for some patients and we look forward to 2014 when we can return to a geographic number.