

**Dear Patients of Baldock Surgery,**

We fully appreciate just how challenging the past 18 months has been for many of you. We have been touched by the kind messages of support many of you have given us, but we are also aware that some of you will be feeling frustrated regarding access to your GP services at the present time.

There has been a lot of misinformation about how we are working and we feel it is vital that we address this openly and honestly, so that you can understand the issues we are facing and support us in providing the best and safest service possible in these extremely challenging times.

- In the last 2 years, demand for GP appointments has significantly increased. The number of patients for each GP has also increased, due to a fall in total GP numbers of nearly 2000 since 2015.
- 75% of the COVID vaccination programme has been rolled out by GP practices, resulting in one of the most rapid and comprehensive COVID vaccination programmes in the world. This is a remarkable achievement, but has contributed to a massive increase in our workload, on top of our day to day jobs at the practice.
- Our hospitals are under immense strain. The waiting list for hospital appointments is huge. This has increased the burden placed on us to care for these often complex patients whilst they wait to be seen by hospital specialists.
- Our practice has been dealing with sickness amongst our doctors, nurses and admin staff, leading to critical staff shortages. Agencies, which we normally use in such situations, have often had no staff available, and we have had to resort to senior members of staff covering reception and cleaning duties just to be able to keep the practice open.

**Abuse**

Not surprisingly, morale has been low, and this has been made worse by the increased abuse we are experiencing from some patients both directly and through social media.

We are aware of the frustrations people are feeling in accessing our services, including our telephone lines. Please be aware that this is a reflection of the immense pressure our system is under, and not of laziness or incompetence in our staff, as is sometimes implied.

Sadly, we have received very unpleasant comments when trying to go about our jobs both in the practice and at the COVID vaccination centres. This is very demoralising for our staff who have been working incredibly hard, doing extra hours at weekends and in evenings, and trying to do their job as best they can. It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that many of us have been driven to tears and this has made staff retention even more difficult.

## **How are we working?**

Despite what is being said by certain media, we have been seeing patients face to face throughout the pandemic. General Practice is different to shops, hairdressers, and banks: we look after sick, elderly, pregnant and immunocompromised people on a daily basis.

In the past we had packed waiting rooms. We now speak to patients by telephone first, and if we feel a physical examination is needed, we will bring that patient in for a face to face appointment. This enables us to limit the number of people we have in our waiting room at any one time, thereby protecting these vulnerable individuals.

In many ways, this new system has been positive. Many of you tell us you appreciate not having to attend the practice in person where possible, and lots of conditions can be safely and efficiently managed by phone, freeing up our time for the patients who need it most. We now rely on our patients using the online Econsult service rather than calling reception. We know that some people struggle with internet access, and by encouraging our internet-savvy patients to go online, the phone lines can be left available for those who need it.

## **Going forward**

The pandemic is not over. We do not know what the coming winter months will bring, but we will continue to adapt as best and as safely as we can. We are recruiting as fast as we can within the current constraints. Recently, we have managed to recruit several new members of staff. However recruitment of doctors and nurses is proving more challenging than ever before.

Please remember that we are all striving for the same thing. Despite how we were depicted at the start of this pandemic we are not, and never wanted to be seen as, 'Superheroes'. We are simply human beings trying to do our jobs to the best of our ability in very difficult circumstances, and we cannot do this without your support.

### **Ways you can support us:**

1. Please use our online Econsult service (instead of calling reception) if you need to speak to a GP or request general advice, a medication review or a sick certificate. <https://baldocksurgery.webgp.com/>
- A. Please call reception if you are unable to use the internet *or* you need to book a blood test, immunisation, flu jab, or smear test.
- B. We strongly advise that patients with COVID symptoms (cough/high temperature/loss of taste or smell) arrange a PCR test and not just a lateral flow test. The test result, whether positive or negative, is important in optimising safety if you are being asked to attend a face to face appointment. <https://www.gov.uk/get-coronavirus-test>

*We thank you for taking the time to read this letter.*

***The Baldock Surgery Team***