

Letter to Area Teams re; Use of 084 numbers by General Practice

Area Team Ref No: 00648

Dear colleagues

An NHS England audit earlier this year has identified the scale of the continued use of 084 numbers in General Practice. It has also given us greater awareness of the problems perceived by general practice in migrating to an alternative number that costs no more to a caller than a local number. The information we received indicated that there are approximately 8% of Practices nationally still using 084 numbers.

Continued use of 084 numbers impacts disproportionately on some members of the public, potentially, those patients who are more vulnerable or who fall into lower socio-economic groups. As a consequence, Mike Bewick, Deputy Medical Director, and I have drafted the letter (attached as an appendix) that we would be grateful could be adapted and forwarded from yourselves to those Practices still using 084 numbers for patients to access their surgery.

The letter in addition to reminding Practices about their contractual obligations highlights the possible impact on health inequalities and access to health care and asks that Practices confirm their intention to not renew any contracts that are near to expiry and to confirm their plans with you regarding the 'reasonable steps' that they have, or aim to take to remedy this on-going problem.

It would be helpful if area teams could actively monitor progress against practice plans. Our intention is to re-audit the use of 084 numbers in 2014 so that NHS England can be assured that actions have resulted in movement away from this practice

I thank you in advance for your help and support.

David Geddes

Dr David Geddes
Head of Primary Care Commissioning
NHS England

The Department for Business, Innovation and Skills recently published draft regulations which will prohibit the use of all expensive numbers (084, 087 and 09) for customer enquiry lines by businesses.

It is now acknowledged that fully inclusive Call Plans (e.g. BT Unlimited Anytime) are the most popular overall. This will obviously be seen most clearly amongst those who are at home during the day. Calls to 084 numbers are excluded from these plans (barring some such numbers from some providers) making the premium cost 100%.

Where queuing arrangements are associated with a premium cost, this impacts most unfairly on those who cannot afford to stay on the line for long periods. This inequity is exacerbated if a cheaper alternative number is offered in parallel, as the caller cannot be sure of being answered in turn, as such a lesser service is provided to those with the least ability to pay.

As one organisation NHS England has been working to understand the extent of this practice nationally and the perceived barriers to Practices migrating to a geographical rate number in order to consider what strategies can be adopted to address this on-going difficulty.

With thanks to the *'fair telecoms campaign'* we are able to outline some facts and bust some myths regarding the use of 084 numbers.

Belief; Many Practices believe that the only way for them to withdraw from a current telephony contract is by paying a (sometimes considerable) penalty

Response; The telecoms industry in general, and leading providers of surgery telephone systems including Daisy Group, providers of the Surgery Line system, permit migration from 084 to geographic rate numbers at any time within the term of existing system and network telephone service arrangements, without penalty. The additional on-going cost incurred on migration from a 084 to geographic rate number represents the loss of the subsidy that has previously been provided, at the expense of patients and other callers.

It is NHS England's view that this represents one "reasonable" step that a practice could take

Belief; Offering a geographical alternative in parallel to a 084 number represents 'reasonable steps' until the 084 contract expires

Response; Providing an 084 number as a better service / higher cost alternative in parallel with a standard geographical option, is an unacceptable misrepresentation of what is meant by "choice" in the NHS. The NHS does not offer distinct tiers of service based on ability to pay

Access to general practice remains a key concern to patients and a strategic objective for NHS England as the commissioner. We look to Practices to work with us on this and many have already embraced new and innovative ways of ensuring good access using digital technologies. We are keen to hear of those initiatives that meet with the approval of patients and help Practices to respond to patient need and manage their workload. If you have such examples please email; england.primarycareops@nhs.net

Your Area Team will be in touch to understand your plans for swiftly moving away from the use of 084 numbers.

Many thanks

Dr Mike Bewick (Deputy Medical Director)

Dr David Geddes (Head of Primary Care Commissioning)