

You may have heard some misinformation in the media lately about medical practices in Scotland. All practices continue to work differently at this time following guidelines from the Scottish Government, Health Board and Health and Social Care Partnership on Social Distancing, limiting footfall, PPE and infection control. These measures are in place to protect patients, limit infection and most importantly, ensure that practices can remain open.

We wish to reassure our patients that we are open, and always have been open, right through the pandemic performing significantly more patient consultations than ever before. Our systems have had to change significantly however, in order to ensure we can continue to provide a safe level of care. This is on a background of major changes to the way General Practice is provided. These changes have not always been explained well to patients.

In the past, if you wanted to see a GP, you simply made an appointment. Now we have another method of contacting us: our online form, and if you 'phone, you will be asked questions about what you require from the practice by our administrative team. You may be redirected to another service, offered an appointment with another health professional, offered clinical advice from one of our clinicians or be given a 'phone appointment with a clinician. Below is an explanation of why these changes have been necessary.

'But why can't I just see a GP?'

Background to how General Practice has changed

The changes that have happened in general practice began long before covid-19. Patients are living longer with more medical problems and many more medications. The complexity of general practice has vastly increased. But the number of GPs has significantly declined.

One solution has been to introduce specialist roles within the practice, such as Advanced Nurse Practitioners, Practice Pharmacists and Physiotherapists. New services have been set up locally such as Minor Injuries, the Community Pharmacy First scheme for treatment of minor medical issues such as urine / throat / skin infections, Opticians to treat eye problems and the Podiatry Service for foot and ankle problems. The GP's role is to manage the most complex cases and support the whole practice team.

If patients continued to choose whom they see, GPs would be fully booked and would be unable to deal with our most unwell patients. This simply isn't safe. The pandemic has increased the demand on our services significantly. We are dealing with many more patients each week than we did pre-covid. This has happened for a number of reasons; patients delayed contacting us last year, lots more people are waiting longer on hospital care and need more GP input as well as the increased workload from covid-19 related illness itself. The complexity of maintaining social distancing within the practice, as we are legally obliged to do by the Scottish Government, makes things more tricky.

As well as all of these factors, we continually have staff off work isolating or unwell with covid-19. This week, particularly, is very challenging.

Triage of Clinical Requests

Our absolute priority is maintaining a safe level of care. This requires us to prioritise the patients who need care most urgently. To do this, we need information from you about your problem.

We ask that you contact the practice by using our online form on our website, if possible. This is the most efficient way of us getting information from you about what we can do for you and keeps our 'phone lines free for the clinicians and our receptionists to call you. Of course, we understand that many patients prefer to contact us by 'phone and that is absolutely fine. The on call clinician, who is not booked with appointments, will look at dozens, more often hundreds, of these requests each day and can often respond and complete your request in a few minutes. We know that this can feel impersonal, for you and for us, and we would all rather that we were speaking to everyone or even better seeing everyone. The sheer volume of patient contacts that we get through each day though is several times higher than we could achieve if we spoke to or saw everyone. So, although there are lots of things we (and you) don't like about these systems, we have had to introduce them to ensure we are getting to care for those that need help most urgently.

Feedback

We know these changes have been quite sudden and it can all feel unfamiliar. We care deeply about the service we provide and all our patients and are constantly looking for ways to improve and make things easier for everyone. We have had lots of positive feedback recently and we are so grateful for this. The team are honestly working harder than we have ever worked before and a small word of encouragement really makes a difference. We know that some patients are unhappy with how things are though and we are sorry when we hear that. We listen carefully to all constructive feedback and would encourage you to continue to help us to improve with your suggestions, which are often really helpful. Please do this by using the online form, or via email to the practice manager. We simply don't have resources to manage responding to comments on Facebook, which is why we have turned these off.

Thanks for taking the time to read this; we hope you have found it helpful.
The Williamwood Team.