

The alternatives to seeing your GP

With media reports of overloaded GPs, the Healthwatch Barnet Primary Care Group volunteers undertook a survey of patient awareness of the alternatives to seeing their GPs. The group made five surgery waiting rooms visits and questioned 104 patients to gain an overview of patients' habits and knowledge of the NHS services available to them. This was done with the aim of also informing Barnet patients of the appropriate place to go to for their treatment or advice. From these we recommend that each surgery invests in some publicity to show the alternative and most appropriate local services for patients to use and what options are available to them when the surgery is closed.

Our findings revealed:

- That most people had heard of Walk-In Centres (92%), Pharmacy (86%), NHS 111 (73%) but only one third knew of Urgent Care Centres
- The majority of patients use their GP for their normal medical treatment, but 10 patients (10%) said they would go to A&E which, if replicated across the Borough, would result in thousands of inappropriate visits
- There was low awareness of the NHS 111 service with up to 50% of patients questioned in one of the surgeries, and overall 25%, unaware of this facility
- The Walk-In Centres had a higher user profile with 92% of patients knowing about this option for treatment and 81% using this service.
- That 85% of patients had awareness of pharmacies providing an advice and treatment alternative for minor medical problems, and 55% had used this service.

Recommendations:

- That practices communicate with their patients over where to go for what. The differences between A&E, Urgent Care Centres and Walk-In Centres are not clear to people.
- That patients have access to the details of all the NHS alternatives for when the surgery is closed. This information should be available in their surgeries, on their websites and raised by practice PPGs. We recommend that the CCG issues an awareness leaflet to all patients.
- Information on late opening hours of local pharmacies be displayed in all surgeries and on their websites.
- That the NHS 111 service is more highly publicised creating higher awareness amongst the whole population of the Borough.
- A programme to be put in place for each Barnet surgery through its PPG to produce its own "Out of Hours" information sheet based on the Healthwatch template supported by a poster displayed in each practice waiting room.

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