

Why do we use online consulting as a 'front door'? Why can't we go back to the 'normal way' of allowing everyone to book their own GP appointments?

To run our service efficiently, it is really important to know in advance what sort of help is needed. We can then tailor our response to offer the most appropriate assistance.

We have lots of different people working in the surgery nowadays and a GP may not necessarily be the best person to help - for instance medication queries can go to the skilled Clinical Pharmacists, routine diabetic reviews can be performed by the Nurse or HCA, certificates can be sorted by Administrators etc - leaving GPs to concentrate on medical problems.

In the 'old days' people would book a GP appointment for everything, often having to wait for a week or more, arrange to take time off work or someone to bring them, sit in the surgery and see the doctor just to ask for their certificate, a prescription or test results, asking for blood tests to be arranged or a simple referral - all things that could have been done with a quick online application.

When an online query comes, we look at them all really quickly - within a few minutes if sent during office hours - and prioritise to respond first to urgent problems.

Most problems are responded to on the same day, or at least within 24 hours. This rapid service improves safety and reduces worry for patients with significant problems. The first response is often a phone call but can be completing the requested action without further contact. We can also book a face to face or video consultation or request more information, maybe a photo of a rash to make a diagnosis and arrange treatment.

By not filling up our appointments for a week or more ahead, we can arrange to see patients who need a face-to-face appointment pretty well any time - often on the same day within an hour or two - and at their convenience and also give time for longer appointments.

It also allows us to rearrange our work rapidly, for instance when the demand increases during spikes in Covid or Flu, so makes our service more responsive. This is especially important now, as we - and general practice and the NHS as a whole - have serious recruitment problems and we have shortfalls in our staffing at times. It saves cancelling a booked clinic when someone is off sick.

What about people uncomfortable with online access? We still have the phones and our receptionists will ask the same questions as the online system, so we have the same information from everyone to prioritise care. Of course, this takes time and can result in queues, so we do try and ask those people who can, to try the Patchs online system: it may not be as difficult as anticipated!

Many people use online services, whether for their banks, utility providers, Amazon, travel, or pizza deliver. A few years back these might have seemed difficult but now they are acceptable to most people and we think the first access to health services digitally will become the norm, especially in this era of reduced resources and increased demand.

No everyone will find the new system acceptable. Certainly, no previous appointment system suited everyone - and GPs have tried many over the years! We hope to evolve to something that suits the majority and welcome any constructive comments in our endeavour to make our service as suitable and responsive as possible.