

Important message from all of the Lordswood GP Partners

Many patients have noted our Practice is struggling to meet demand and we thought we should write to explain the background to current situation, the actions we are taking and, above all to apologise.

First, we must stress that everyone at the Lordswood, Selcroft and Quinton Family Practices is working flat out to achieve the best possible performance and we are deeply disappointed that the service we are giving is falling a long way short of the standards we would normally set ourselves and which our patients rightly expect. Quite frankly, we are overwhelmed by demand, and we are trying our hardest to overcome the problems. We know that we are not unique in this, other practices have similar and worse problems, but that is no consolation for us or our patients.

As you will have read and heard in the national news, although death rates associated with Covid are thankfully at lower levels than at the peak of the pandemic, we are still seeing infection rates running at something like 30,000 new cases per day. We see the local consequences of this not only on patients but also our staff. Staff absences due to Covid come without notice and with devastating effects on our capacity to respond to patient needs. Suddenly finding that a doctor must isolate throws their list into chaos for many days as we try to reschedule their work and add more to our backlog.

We are effectively caught in a trap. To protect patients and staff we continue to keep high standards of covid hygiene in the Practice, but this also reduces capacity. In addition to the demands imposed by the continuing high levels of infection, we are also seeing a massive pent-up demand from patients with other, often serious, problems. The almost total focus of the NHS in the last year or so on the virus has denied many other services and treatments and the backlog is now at extreme levels; the like of which we have never seen before in our GP careers – some of 30 years. When compared with similar periods in 2019 the increased load is massive. In mid- 2019 we typically received 4000 calls per month which rose to 9000 calls per month earlier this year. We know that in reality the number is probably higher as many patients join the phone queue and give up before getting through.

We have taken many actions in our attempts to reduce the impact of the overload and we have more planned. Some have worked well and have actually enabled us to respond better than we would have done if we had not made the changes. We have increased telephone capacity and used on-line consultations to increase capacity. Without these changes, things would be even more difficult. Others have not worked out so well. We invested time and effort in finding and implementing one of the best available on-line triage systems. This did not deliver the benefits we needed and reluctantly we had abandoned this and our second choice for the time being. I have no doubt that in the future when the developers have improved the capabilities of these applications, they will come back and serve us well but, frankly, today they are not fit for purpose.

We are currently working with our telecoms supplier to provide a ‘call-back’ system which should avoid the need to hang on for ages when you do call. We are also introducing a daily reception support doctor to efficiently deal with “on the day” requests that receptionists often have difficulty offering a solution for as they are not clinically trained. Online booking for some appointments has also returned. Staff at all levels understand that the service we are giving is not what is wanted. Please be assured we are truly trying our hardest to deliver. We don’t know how long this crisis will last or how soon we will be able to get on top of the capacity issues, but I do assure you that we are truly trying our very hardest.

Finally, we have one request. We know how worrying and frustrating this can be when you have health concerns or need support, but please do not take out your frustration on our staff. There have been some awful comments

and unacceptable insults made particularly to reception staff. They are demoralising and do not help anyone. We understand how you feel, and we are dismayed we cannot offer appointments and services when they are needed. But we cannot offer what does not exist.

I hope we can write with better news soon. Please bear with us as we struggle through.

With our best wishes,

The Lordswood GP Partners