

Dear All,

We are very much aware how difficult this time of year can be. Demand for services is extremely high and we have to operate in a constrained funding environment. We are also acutely aware of the various financial pressures and workforce challenges being faced. These are being experienced across the whole of the health and social care system but we do recognise that they are very problematic in your teams managing increasing demands.

We acknowledge the update to the BMA safe workload guidance for GPs in Scotland that was published in September 2023, and we do want to work with you to help protect colleagues in General Practice from risk of burn out due to overwork and general stress as well as support retention of staff and recruitment into General Practice. However, we are also keen to ensure that patients have good access to General Medical Services and their care is safeguarded as much as possible during times of significant service pressure. We are very much aware that all parts of the health and social care system are struggling and simply diverting from one to another achieves little but a poor patient experience.

Practices do have a duty to meet the reasonable needs for their patients during core hours, including unscheduled care. However, we accept that in certain circumstances, such as significant staff sickness or increased daily demand, that there needs to be a pragmatic approach to allow for ongoing triage of cases and allow practices to prioritise demand and need more appropriately than simply adopting a set number as set out in the BMA guidance. In this way we can ensure those with greatest need for, and benefit from, General Practice review are secured service where possible, but those that can wait do.

A suggested phone system voice message to use in these circumstances is:

*"For any life-threatening emergencies please attend A+E or call 999.*

*The practice is under significant pressure due to demand for appointments. This demand has now far outstripped our safe working levels.*

*If you require urgent attention please hold and your details will be taken by one of our admin team (or complete an econsult request on line<sup>1</sup>). Our on-call doctor will triage all urgent requests. They will manage as many cases as they can in order of clinical need. However, it may be that they cannot attend to your needs today.*

*If you have not heard back from the practice by 6pm and you feel you cannot wait until tomorrow, then please look at the symptom guides at [www.nhsinform.scot](http://www.nhsinform.scot) or call 111 for advice."*

It may be prudent to document the safety netting advice given to patients who do hold and speak with the admin team. This allows practice confidence that safety netting has been deployed and patients are safe-guarded.

We will also support your triage decisions. It is ok to ask patients to wait for non-urgent needs e.g. reviews of chronic conditions, while triaging or prioritising patients with potentially serious illness and acute infections during peak demand. We will also support rigorous signposting to other community services and professionals that are available.

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<sup>1</sup> Insert if eConsult offered by the Practice

We hope this is helpful and gives confidence in protecting patients, colleagues, and services. The LMC will be asking practices how often it is utilised, and practices should also let the HSCP and PCCO know, so there is a greater understanding of the pressures. Practices who are struggling despite using this message should alert all to seek support when required.

Wishing you all the best for 2024.

Kind regards,

Iain, Jeremy, John, Rebecca, Robin, Douglas and Hayley

Iain Morrison  
Chair GP Sub-Committee and LMC

Jeremy Chowings  
Deputy Medical Director Primary Care

John Hardman  
Clinical Director East Lothian HSCP

Rebecca Green  
Clinical Director Midlothian HSCP

Robin Balfour  
Clinical Director Edinburgh HSCP

Douglas McGown  
Clinical Director West Lothian HSCP

Hayley Harris  
Clinical Director LUCS