

LOBBY YOUR MP ON THE FUTURE OF GENERAL PRACTICE (ENGLAND)

The BMA Parliamentary Unit (ssolanki@bma.org.uk) has produced a toolkit to help GPs wishing to contact their MPs about the threats to the future of general practice. It can be found at www.bbolmc.co.uk

The toolkit includes the following information:

- Background information on GP contract negotiations and the recent developments on extended hours
- Issues for LMCs & GPs to raise with their MPs
- Information on how LMCs & GPs can identify and contact their MPs
- How to lobby MPs effectively
- A template letter to send to MPs- **which LMCs & GPs should adapt according to their local circumstances.**

SEE BELOW FOR FULL DETAILS

LOBBY YOUR MP ON THE FUTURE OF GENERAL PRACTICE (ENGLAND)

The BMA's Parliamentary Unit and General Practitioners Committee (GPC) is encouraging LMCs and GPs to contact their MPs about the threats to the future viability of general practice in England. Our objective is to convince MPs that the Government's proposals for general practice will undermine the high standards of clinical care which GPs currently offer to their patients. LMCs should consider what impact the Government's proposals will have on patients, GPs and their practice staff and how to communicate these issues to their MPs. This paper will show LMCs and GPs how to lobby MPs effectively.

Background

A new contract for GPs was introduced in 2004 and was endorsed by the GPC, NHS Employers and the Government. It was signed off by the Chancellor of the Exchequer at the time – Gordon Brown. The contract was designed to address a number of problems faced by the profession which included the increasing difficulty of recruiting and retaining GPs, low morale and a previous contract that penalised practices financially if they offered high quality care.

Despite the GPC demonstrating during the 2003 negotiations that GPs would meet their quality targets, in 2006, the Government felt they were paying too much for quality and were not getting enough in return. GPs as a result agreed to provide extra quality care in areas such as dementia care, depression management and looking after those with chronic kidney disease, without additional funding, to balance the perceived 'over-delivery' of quality activities by GPs. Changes were also made to GPs' pensions arrangements.

Over the past few months, the BMA's GPC and NHS Employers (on behalf of the Government) have been negotiating further changes to the GP contract. This resulted in a package of proposals, which included a sensible balance between offering additional appointments to be flexibly based on patient needs and local circumstances, and further encouraging improvements in the quality of care offered to patients with long term serious illnesses such as heart failure and osteoporosis. This was all to be done within existing resources.

The Government, and the Prime Minister in particular, rejected these proposals. They are insisting that practices offer significantly more routine surgery appointments late in the evening (after 6.30pm) or on Saturday mornings. The Prime Minister did not want any of the quality care changes being recommended.

The GPC is seeking the views of GPs across the country as they could not accept the Government's position of putting access targets before quality of care. On 21st December 2007, the Government gave notice that if their proposals were rejected by GPs, they would instead impose even more draconian changes, which would remove large amounts of funding from all practices.

GPs have faced an unprecedented campaign against them over the last two years. This is despite achieving and surpassing every target set for them. They have already accepted significant modifications to their new contract which resulted in them doing more work for no new resources.

Practice income has been cut back in real terms for the last two years and individual GP earnings do not reflect the amounts suggested in the lay press. GPs are very concerned that the Government is renegeing on its commitment to the GP contract time and again.

KEY ISSUES TO RAISE WITH MPs

Impact on patient care:

- GPs' ability to deliver high quality clinical care to patients is being undermined. The Government's proposed changes to the QOF has the potential to diminish care for patients with diabetes, chronic lung disease, heart disease and those at risk of strokes as funding is shifted from these areas to finance the very small, but genuine, demand for extended opening hours. The GPC also urged the Government to invest in new evidence-based areas, such as improved care for patients with heart failure and osteoporosis as part of the QOF review. However, the Government chose to place exclusive emphasis on extended opening hours to the detriment of improvements in quality clinical care to patients. GPs want to deliver high quality clinical care to their patients but the Government is undermining their ability to do so.

Questions for local GPs to consider: What is the incidence of heart failure, osteoporosis and peripheral vascular disease amongst patients in your practice? Can you show your MP that constituents/ patients would benefit if QOF points were reallocated to these areas?

- The perception is that GPs work 9 – 5, so clarify to your MP that GPs' hours of responsibility are 8am to 6.30pm and that many conduct routine surgeries throughout these times.
- There is a real risk that the Government's consumerist approach to primary care will lead to the needs of patients with long-term conditions being increasingly ignored in order to meet the demands of patients (often commuters) with short term illnesses. Patients value the continuity of care that 'traditional' general practice provides, but this could be put at risk if the Government's policies are implemented. For example, GPs may have to reduce the number of appointments they provide during the day, a time that currently suits the vast majority of patients, to provide extended hours at other times. Other services may also be affected which would have an impact on those who use GP services the most - the elderly, children and people with chronic illnesses. Again, the Government's short-sightedness could mean that the patients who need to access GP services most may lose out.
- The average three-doctor practice of six thousand patients could lose up to £36,000 in resources if it does not carry out extended hours and does not meet the requirements demanded by the Government's revised access scheme. The £36,000 loss in income can be attributed to changes in two funding streams: approximately £18,000 could be lost through changes to the Choose & Book and Access DESs and a further £18,000 (approx.) through changes to QOF points, some of which GPs may not be able to earn back. The loss of such significant sums could have a major impact upon GPs' ability to deliver clinical care and in some instances, could have a significant impact on the ability of some practices to maintain their current level of services to their patients.

- The Patient Experience Survey (2007) suggests that there is limited demand locally for extended hours before 8am, after 6.30pm and at the weekends. However, GPC offered to provide flexible extended hours so that services could be provided according to local needs. The Government rejected this suggestion. The bigger question here is why the Government is ignoring the wishes of the vast majority of constituents and patients by demanding that GPs provide a service that is neither wanted nor needed by local patients. The Government is trying to micromanage from Westminster how local health services are delivered.

Questions for local GPs to consider: Is there demand for extended hours locally? What do your local PES results show in England? Do you have an example of extended hours not meeting patients' needs, such as having late surgeries when the bus service stops early? Can you demonstrate that the PCO would be wasting money on extending hours when it could be better spent on patient care? How should extended hours be delivered locally?

- Under the new proposals, practices may only be able to earn back a proportion of the removed funding if they agree to provide extended hours surgeries. The Government is encouraging PCTs to use some of this money to fund new privately run practices that every PCT has been told it must establish this year, regardless of need, as part of the Darzi NHS Next Steps Review. Is it appropriate for the Government to remove significant sums of money from well-established GP practices to fund practices run by multinational private companies? These practices, which use employed GPs and locums, are reported to have a higher turnover of GPs and higher running costs than 'traditional' models of general practice. There are also concerns that these practices will have a destabilising effect on well-established, local practices. Is it fair or appropriate to give patients a lower quality, more impersonal service? In comparison, established UK general practice offers a high quality, personal, list-based service and continuity of care - factors which are so valued by the vast majority of patients.

Questions for local GPs to consider: Do you have any walk-in centres or polyclinics in your area already? How often are these used?

HOW TO RAISE THESE ISSUES WITH YOUR LOCAL MP(s) IN ENGLAND

Identifying your MP

The BMA website lists MPs by LMC area. Log in to the BMA website to access this information:

<http://www.bma.org.uk/ap.nsf/Content/MPs+by+Local+Medical+Committee+%28LMC%29+-+A>

Constituency and Westminster contact details for MPs can be found on The Guardian website: <http://politics.guardian.co.uk/>

You can identify MPs by county through this website:

<http://www.parliament.uk/directories/hciolists/clomps.cfm>

If you would like any assistance in identifying your local MP(s) or for further information, please contact Susan Solanki, Parliamentary Liaison Officer at ssolanki@bma.org.uk

Contacting your MP

Once you've identified your MP(s), the next step is to approach them. You can contact your MPs both from your home and place of work if the MPs are different. If you are contacting MPs on behalf of your LMC, where possible, try to involve a doctor, or doctors, who live or work in the MP's constituency. It is worth emphasising that you are representing the MP's local doctors.

There are various ways of contacting your MPs. **For example, the BMA's Parliamentary Unit will shortly set up an online system, which will help you to email your MP directly through the BMA website. Please follow this link:** <http://www.bma.org.uk/ap.nsf/Content/Home>

Alternatively, you may want to meet your MP face-to-face or telephone them.

1. Writing to your MP:

The address for all MPs is: House of Commons, London, SW1A 0AA. If you write to more than one MP, you will need to stamp each letter separately to comply with Post Office rules.

Alternatively, you may wish to write to your MP at their constituency office. The Guardian website lists both Westminster and constituency contact details:

<http://politics.guardian.co.uk/>

Writing a letter or email to your MP

A template letter is attached to the end of the document to help you. **Please adapt this to your local circumstances as a personal letter written in your own style carries more weight than an obvious campaign circular.**

- i. Write an individual letter to each MP; if you are writing to a number of MPs, localise the examples you use e.g. PES results, incidence of illness e.g. osteoporosis prevention etc that could've been funded under QOF had the Government accepted the GPC proposal, your surgery opening times etc.
- ii. Give the letter a heading and start it by introducing yourself. Are you a constituent? Are you a LMC chair? Is your surgery in the MP's constituency? Introduce the issue immediately.
- iii. Keep your letter short (one page if possible, two pages maximum)

- iv. End the letter with an 'action' or a question for the MP which you can follow up.
- v. **If you would like to meet the MP, include full contact details or write that you will be phoning shortly to arrange a meeting.**

Alternatively, you can email your MP quickly and simply through the BMA's website. Please follow this link-
<http://www.bma.org.uk/ap.nsf/Content/Home>

2. Meeting your MP:

A face-to-face meeting is by far the best way to lobby MPs because of the opportunity to build up a personal relationship with them. MPs are based in Westminster from Monday to Thursday and in the constituency on a Friday. If you are based outside London, Fridays are the best days for you to try and secure a meeting with your MP.

Securing a meeting:

- i. Telephone the MP's constituency office and explain that you are a constituent/ GP who works in a (named) practice in the MP's constituency.
- ii. Explain that you would like to arrange a meeting on a Friday morning or afternoon with the MP to discuss the impact on the MP's constituents of the Government's proposals to extend GP hours.
- iii. Offer two or three times/ dates when you are available for a meeting.
- iv. Offer to hold the meeting at your practice (so that MPs can meet practice staff too).
- v. If you are arranging a meeting on behalf of the LMC, contact other local MPs (from the same political party) and ask if they are available to attend the meeting.

Preparing for the meeting:

- i. Identify colleagues who may wish to attend the meeting with you e.g another GP, a patient representative. It is preferable not to have more than three people involved.
- ii. Prepare your case in advance; if going with colleagues, discuss between you the points you want to raise. Raise only three or four key issues- you don't want your core message to get lost.
- iii. Make sure you have facts and figures to hand to back up the key points you want to make. Have the Patient Experience Survey figures for your area ready - you may be able to demonstrate that extended hours are a waste of money because patients are satisfied with current opening hours. How many patients in your practice suffer from osteoporosis, blood vessel disease and heart failure? You could show that money allocated for extended hours could be better spent on improving the lives of patients/ constituents.
- iv. Don't worry if you are faced with a question you can't answer - tell the MP you will write with the information.
- v. If possible, leave the MP with written information so that there is a record of the points raised.
- vi. Be clear about what you want the MP to do e.g. lobby Ministers on your behalf, table parliamentary questions, contact the PCT, raise the issue in the media.

After the meeting:

- i. Send the MP a follow-up letter reiterating the key points you have made and any 'actions' you would like them to take.

3. Telephoning your MP:

To speak to your MP between Monday and Thursday, call them at the House of Commons. You can find out what your MP's House of Commons phone number is through either <http://politics.guardian.co.uk/> or through the House of Commons switchboard on 020 7219 3000 (ask to be put through to your MP). If you would like to speak to your MP on a Friday, contact the constituency office. See <http://politics.guardian.co.uk/> or the MP's personal website for constituency contact details

Tips to remember when telephoning your MP:

- Keep it short & keep it simple - only raise two or three issues
- Be positive - explain what GPs could do to improve patients' health.
- Outline what you want the MP to do.

If you have any queries, questions or would like further advice, please contact the
BMA's Parliamentary Unit:
Sue Marks (Head, Parliamentary Unit) smarks@bma.org.uk or 020 7383 6223
Susan Solanki (Parliamentary Liaison Officer) ssolanki@bma.org.uk or 020 7383
6681

TEMPLATE LETTER TO ADAPT ACCORDING TO YOUR LOCAL CIRCUMSTANCES

Dear MX XXXX XXXX MP,

Threats to the future of general practice

As a constituent and a GP at the XXX XXXX practice in your constituency, I am seriously concerned about what the Government is trying to do to General Practice. I believe the current policies and plans being proposed by the Government could significantly undermine the high standards of clinical care I offer to my patients.

You may be aware that the Government is threatening to force practices to open before 8am, after 6.30pm and on Saturdays for routine appointments. A major national survey of 2 million voters (which cost £11million pounds) found that 84% of patients were happy with existing appointment hours. In XXXXXX (insert your locality/ MP's constituency), the survey found that XX% of patients are happy with opening hours of their local practices. I would be interested to hear whether you think it is a good use of taxpayers' money to fund extended opening hours when there is little demand for this service locally.

You may also be aware that the Government is moving resources from the Quality and Outcomes Framework, which is an evidence based scheme to improve quality of care, to fund the extended hours initiative. I am concerned that the Government rejected suggestions from the BMA that money which could be spent on tackling osteoporosis, heart failure and kidney failure will instead be spent on extending surgery hours. Do you think scarce NHS funds should be spent on extended hours at the expense of improvements in clinical care?

Furthermore, practices such as mine may have our very existence put at risk by the change suggested by the Government. Our practice could lose resources of up to £12kxGPs if the Government's proposals are imposed upon us: this could affect the future of our XXXX (insert number) patient practice.

I would also ask you to consider the personal impact on GPs of the Government's proposals to extend our hours. (Adapt to your personal circumstances) I already work 55-60 hours a week as the only full time member of the practice. To open late two evenings a week would fall on me as the only full time member of staff. There is a serious risk that some GPs will resign from their practice or a move to salaried status elsewhere because of the pressures and demands being put upon them. Can the NHS afford to lose experienced doctors who still retain enthusiasm for patient care?

I urge you to lobby the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State for Health to ask them to come back to the negotiating table with the profession. While I am willing to modernise my practice, it would be indefensible for the Government to sacrifice patient care and the goodwill of GPs in the interest of a purely political agenda.

I would welcome the opportunity to discuss these issues with you in more depth. Please feel free to contact me on either 07XXX XXX XXX or (insert email address).

Yours sincerely,
Dr XXXX XXXXX
Practice XXXXXXXX