

NOVUM HEALTH PARTNERSHIP
BARING ROAD BRANCH PATIENTS' GROUP

Online Meeting: 4 June 2020
4.00 p.m.

MINUTES

Present: Lee Walker (LW, chair), Bob Blunden, Pat Blunden, Robert Thompson (minute taker), Janet Thompson, Patrick Connolly, Suzy Wilkinson, Paul Howell, Mythily Mahatharan (Novum), Dr Judy Chen (Novum), Seyhan Yusuf (Novum)

1. Before beginning formal business, LW outlined the etiquette for conducting online meetings in terms of waiting for cues to speak, minimising background noise, muting devices when not speaking and so on.
2. LW then welcomed and introduced everyone who had signed in to the meeting. Apologies had been received from Jan Shah.
3. The minutes of the Annual General Meeting on 30 January were agreed to be accurate, although they will not be formally accepted until the next AGM. Those of the ordinary meeting which followed the AGM were also accepted as an accurate record.
4. Matters arising from the previous ordinary meeting minutes:
 - i. LW asked whether the practice had made any progress towards a report on missed and abandoned phone calls and on access arrangements generally. It was accepted that in the context of the COVID-19 epidemic this report had rightly been deferred; patient experience of current access arrangements was to be discussed later in the agenda.
 - ii. Dr Chen reported that the practice had made progress with the patient survey circulated with the previous set of minutes, though regrettably without formal PG input. Comments from individual PG members had, however, been received, and a final draft has been completed for the partners' review.
5. 'Virtual by default' primary care

Dr Chen outlined the steps the practice had taken to adapt to the remote working required in current circumstances.

Each site has been staffed each day by one duty GP, one Physician Associate, at least one nurse and one or more receptionists, all observing social distancing. Phone access for patients is available each day from 8.00 a.m., and receptionists have been handling calls for both sites.

Initial triaging is carried out by telephone; if possible and desirable, a video consultation is then arranged, followed by a face-to-face consultation only if strictly necessary. Nurse appointments in person are limited to vital injections (including vitamin B12, anti-psychotic injections and childhood immunisations), contraception and wound dressing.

Dr Chen was asked what arrangements existed for blood tests. She explained that these had continued to be provided but by appointment only, those considered non-essential being deferred. For patients with stable chronic conditions, the recommendation is in fact for annual tests, although individual GPs have often chosen to carry them out more frequently, and patients will be invited to attend for tests when the appropriate time comes.

LW asked how the current arrangements impact on patients who do not have access to technology or are not confident about using it. Dr Chen replied that if a video consultation is impossible for any reason the patient will be seen in person, either at the practice or at a 'hot hub' established for those with suspected coronavirus symptoms; it was explained that 'hot hubs' are centres equipped with the highest level of protective equipment, the nearest one to Baring Road being at Marvels Lane.

Footfall at the sites has been greatly reduced, and the practice has been working towards new arrangements to be introduced as the number of patients attending in person gradually begins to increase again. At present the doors are kept locked, but this could create its own problems so some other way of regulating access will need to be devised; other possibilities might include restrictions on seating and the number of people in the waiting room at any time. There was general agreement that the high probability of non-symptomatic infection and the possibility of apparently healthy people carrying a high viral load mean that a great deal of care will be required for a long time, and that every possible method of restricting the spread of the disease will need to be used.

Dr Chen was asked whether any Novum staff members had had COVID-19. One has tested positive; several others have been very unwell, but the poor availability of testing has meant that no-one knows whether they were suffering from COVID or something else. Fortunately all have made a good recovery.

There was some discussion of referrals to consultants. Dr Chen explained that the NHS has a policy called 'consultant connect' which gives GPs access to specialist advice; only urgent or essential cases will be referred onwards, and for some time in the future consultants will of course have a backlog of appointments due to cancellations in the lockdown. One of the PG members described arrangements made for essential regular injections, involving a highly streamlined procedure and fully masked staff; there was a general sense that the NHS across the board has responded creatively and effectively to the emergency.

LW asked who is setting the agenda for easing the lockdown and how the PG might interact with the practice's response.

Overall policy is set by the CCG and One Health Lewisham; for the individual practice, the key issue is patient flow. Relatively few people have been coming to the surgery; there must, therefore, be concern that sick people have been staying away and will fairly soon need to be accommodated. It was reported that there had been a marked increase in phone calls after the last bank holiday, although that initial rush appears to have calmed down since. Eventually, however, some way will have to be found to manage larger numbers, with regard to the safety of both patients and staff.

6. Patient experience of using BRMC during the lockdown

PG members reported a few specific problems: one involved a long wait on the phone on a bank holiday, when it was not clear whether there was a delay due to heavy demand or the practice was in fact closed and the phone company had not provided a suitable message. Another issue concerned online access through Evergreen; it is understood that the online system has necessarily been suspended during the epidemic, but Evergreen informs patients attempting to use it that they are not registered rather than that the system itself is temporarily inactive. Dr Chen said that the practice will follow CCG guidance about reinstating online booking when the time comes.

The great majority of reports, however, were highly complimentary, describing useful telephone consultations as well as efficient onward referrals and prompt delivery of prescriptions to pharmacists. On one occasion a GP made five return phone calls to resolve an issue concerning shielding.

7. AOB

- i) A member who has used Ask NHS reported that it worked well, asking appropriate questions and making effective connection with pharmacies. Another diagnostic app discussed gives an unhelpfully wide range of possibilities; Dr Chen advised that Ask NHS should be used instead.
- ii) Dr Chen expressed regret at the lack of PPG input during this time, and there was some discussion of ways the group might operate as the current situation continues. In the course of a wide-ranging discussion, Seyhan explained that he has already set up Microsoft Teams for use by the group: this has the potential to integrate other Microsoft applications, and 150 patients have expressed an interest in using it. The way forward will probably involve some combination of online meetings limited to around ten participants and much wider written communication; the possibility of involving a large number of patients in an online forum was warmly welcomed.
- iii) The group was pleased to learn that Dr Arora is well and still at work.
- iv) The practice reported that the colposcopy clinic will resume next week, with appropriate restrictions on numbers, and that two new GPs have been appointed for August. LW asked if the practice could provide a report on lost and missed phone calls for our next meeting, despite the very positive experience of PG members; he also asked whether there were 'phone DNAs' in terms of patients unavailable at the time of their phone appointment. Dr Chen said that patients sometimes cannot be contacted, although the practice always makes repeated attempts.

Through the chairman, the group thanked the practice staff for their work and commitment during the epidemic, observing that working in health care in current circumstances entails a real risk.

The meeting was declared closed at 5.00 p.m.

Next meeting: Thursday 16 July at 4.00 p.m.