

WEST PENNINE LOCAL MEDICAL COMMITTEE

HOME VISITING GUIDELINES

INTRODUCTION

This guidance is based on the guidance which Cleveland LMC published in March 2004. West Pennine LMC are very grateful to Cleveland LMC for sharing their document with us. It was reviewed and revised in October 2015 based on the experience of GPs in the West Pennine LMC area.

The extent of visiting by GPs is not repeated in any other European or North American country.

From the patient's point of view visiting is convenient; they may be blissfully unaware that that domiciliary care in many cases impedes the provision of modern medicine. As far as the doctor is concerned they may well remain unsure as to where they stand in relation to their contractual obligation and might fear that to modify established patterns of visiting behaviour may render them at risk of criticism.

In this advice, no distinction between "in hours" and "out of hours" has been made. The place of treatment is decided only on a patient's medical condition assessed in a reasonable way by a GP.

Throughout the development of this advice, the quality of medical care offered by general practitioners to their patients has been of paramount importance. The emphasis is that clinical effectiveness must, in some circumstances, take precedence over patient convenience

VISITING AND THE NEW GP CONTRACT

The circumstances when a practice is required to visit a patient are defined in Regulations¹. A practice is required to attend a patient outside the surgery premises when:

¹ General Medical Services Contracts Regulations 2004, as amended, Schedule 6 para 3
Personal Medical Services Agreements Regulations 2004, as amended, Schedule 5 para 4
Alternative Provider Medical Services Directions (No2) Directions 2005 do not require attendance outside practice premises; contractors should look at their individual arrangements

- 1) In the case of a patient whose medical condition is such that in the reasonable opinion of the contractor -
 - a) Attendance on the patient is required; and
 - b) it would be inappropriate for him to attend at the practice premises

- 2) The places referred to in sub-paragraph (1) are -
 - a) the place recorded in the patient's medical record as being his last home address
 - b) some other place in the contractor's practice area.

- (3) Nothing in this paragraph prevents the patient from-
 - a) arranging for the referral of a patient without first seeing the patient, in case where the medical condition of that patient make that course of action inappropriate.
 - b) Visiting the patient in circumstances where this paragraph does not place it under obligation to do so.

The key phrase in this formal definition is "whose medical condition is such that in the reasonable opinion of the contractor". In practice this requires a GP to visit a patient at home when two conditions have been satisfied:

1. Does the patient have a medical condition which requires the doctor to see them?
2. Is it appropriate on medical grounds for the patient to attend at the practice premises?

If the answer to either of the above two is YES then the patient should be visited. There is no obligation on a GP to visit in circumstances where the patient's medical condition does not meet these conditions. The LMC will support any doctor paying the levy to the West Pennine LMC who, having used reasonable opinion about a patient's medical condition, receives a complaint relating to a refusal to visit.

Alternatives to visiting and "voluntary visits"

A doctor may arrange for a patient to be referred to another NHS service without seeing the patient if the patient's condition makes that a reasonable alternative. An obvious use of this arrangement is for patients with chest pains, and the chest pain guidelines should be followed and an ambulance arranged rather than a visit undertaken. At other times a doctor may either admit a patient to hospital or make a referral to a community service without visiting them.

A doctor may choose to visit a patient when there is no requirement to do so, although it is good practice to record in the notes why a doctor is visiting.

Visit to nursing and residential homes

The status of a GP's patient living in a registered home, either nursing or residential, is no different to any other patient living in their own home. The requirement to visit a

patient exists only when there is a reasonable medical reason for the visit and a reason, on medical grounds, why the patient cannot attend the surgery.

Registered homes often give many reasons for patients not being able to attend the practice premises. Many of a registered home's residents travel outside the home for social activities and, unless prevented from doing so by the condition requiring attention, these residents should be expected to attend surgery premises. The absence of staff to provide escorts, or lack of transport is not relevant and the judgement that a GP must make is whether or not the patient is fit to attend.

Preventing problems

As with most areas of complaint, lack of information and confusion about the service available makes a patient or their carer unhappy. Conversely complaints may be avoided by adequate information about the reasons home visits are undertaken and the criteria on which the assessment is made.

The LMC recommends that practices inform all patients, using a combination of practice leaflets, and other publicity, how to request a visit, under what circumstances a visit is justified, and the criteria the practice uses in assessing any request for a visit.

Conclusion

Doctors should only undertake visits when they have made a reasonable opinion that a visit is required on medical grounds.

It is important that, as in all aspects of general practice, the advice is viewed as advice and that the circumstances of every request for a consultation are judged on its merits. Practices are advised that proper training of reception staff and full written protocols for receptionists dealing with requests for access to the services of a practice should be in place.

Proper publicity should be available on the practice's criteria for dealing with requests for visits.

BACKGROUND FOR CHANGES TO GP HOME VISITING

Quality of medical care

- General practice has never been, and can never be, an emergency service along the lines of the police or the ambulance. There is neither the manpower for this, nor the infrastructure e.g. communications to work this way. To try and

work this way would inevitably harm other aspects of GPs' work. GPs cannot provide an emergency response service when scrubbed up providing minor surgery to patients. Neither is it appropriate for a doctor to feel compelled to leave a busy pre-booked surgery to attend a patient at home, who it would seem may be suffering from a serious medical emergency. It is highly likely that the doctor will contribute little to the patient's care above and beyond that offered by paramedics. Waiting for them to attend may well cause ultimate delay in hospital treatment and, in addition to all this, the major disruption to many patients' timetable caused by the doctor leaving their surgery patients.

- A doctor's ability to properly assess and to treat a patient seen in their own home is often impaired by the far from ideal clinical situation of poor lighting, unhygienic conditions, and such simple difficulties as soft beds making it impossible to palpate abdomens correctly.
- As technology moves on, sophisticated tests , treatments and equipment are being increasingly employed to improve care; much of this is not portable and thus not available on home visits. In many cases the doctor is unable to access the patient's electronic health record or other resources accessible via their computer system which inherently makes it less safe for a patient. Modern computer systems provide warnings for drug to drug interactions, allergies, alternative medications and a plethora of other information that is not accessible even on current modern computer tablets.
- Speed of treatment is facilitated by restricting home visiting to those patients who really need it. Others are to be encouraged to attend properly equipped medical facilities where triage can take place, ensuring patients are seen quickly and those that need it, immediately.
- A change of patterns of care during evenings and nights from the traditional model where many GPs each see a few patients through the night at patients' homes, to a situation where fewer doctors see many patients in properly equipped and staffed centres, will result in many fewer patients being treated the following morning by tired, and some may say, less "safe" doctors.

Relationship to the out-of-hours arrangements

GPs out of hours service involve the provision of out of hours primary health care centres, this change from the 'traditional' approach clearly only functions properly if the majority of patients attend the centres, rather than being visited at home.

International comparison

No other country has adopted the visiting habits of British general practice.

Issues for the profession

Workload:

The workload of British general practitioners has increased greatly over recent years. It seems that it is set to rise further and unless GPs are allowed to deliver care in the most efficient way possible, the system seems likely to break down. If patients are seen at designated centres, rather than their own homes, then quite simply more patients can be attended to by a given number of clinicians.

- **Safety:** Doctors are particularly vulnerable to physical attack when home visiting; walking alone through inner city streets is far from safe for GPs of either sex.
- **Stress/Low Morale/Poor Recruitment:** Inappropriate demands for home visits are often quoted by GPs as a major source of dissatisfaction.
- **Medico-legal:** The current medico-legal climate is such that it is reasonable for a GP, with some justification, to have reservations about the prudence of making decisions based on an assessment made in the far from ideal clinical setting of a patient's home.

Financial

- **Cost:** Paying highly trained and expensive GPs to spend much of their time driving themselves from house to house makes little sense

CLARIFICATION & EXAMPLES OF ADVICE IN ACTION

Situation where GP home visiting makes clinical sense and provides the best way to give a medical opinion:

- The terminally ill
- The truly bed-bound patient for whom travel to premises by car would cause a deterioration in medical condition or unacceptable discomfort

Situations where, on occasions, visiting may be useful:

Where, after initial assessment over the telephone, a seriously ill patient may be helped by a GP's attendance to prepare them for travel to hospital. That is, where a GP's other commitments do not prevent them from arriving prior to the ambulance. Examples of such situations are:

- Myocardial infarction
- Severe shortness of breath

It must be understood that if a GP is about to embark on a booked surgery and is informed that one of their patients is suffering from symptoms suggestive of an acute medical emergency, such as a myocardial infarction, the sensible approach will usually be to summon emergency paramedic ambulance and arrange admission to hospital rather than attending personally.

Situations where visiting is not usually in the patient's best interests:

- Common symptoms of childhood, fevers, cold, cough, earache, headache, diarrhoea/vomiting and most cases of abdominal pain. These patients are almost always well enough to travel. The old wives tale that it is unwise to take a child out with a fever is blatantly untrue. It is not a doctor's role to arrange transport.
- Adults with common problems of cough, sore throat, flu, back pain, abdominal pain, are also readily transportable by car to a doctor's premises.
- Common problems in the elderly, such as poor mobility, joint pain, general malaise, would also be best treated by consultation at a doctor's premises. The exception to this would be in the truly bed-bound patient.

