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NHS PRESCRIPTIONS

New guidance from NHS England that encourages doctors’ surgeries to abandon taking repeat prescription requests by phone could leave millions of elderly and vulnerable patients without access to vital medicines.

The move, endorsed by the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) has been slammed by leading charities for the elderly and disabled, which claim it could lead to people becoming “seriously unwell”.

GP services across England have warned that from 1 September they will no longer accept repeat prescription requests via the phone and that patients will be asked to either order online or attend the surgery in person in order to order medication.

According to the latest data from the Office for National Statistics, of the four million adults who have never used the internet, 2.5 million are aged 75 years and over. There are also around 2.9 million disabled people without regular access to the web.

The NPC General Secretary has written to Sir Simon Stevens, Chief Executive of the NHS in England and Professor Martin Marshall, Chair of the Royal College of General Practitioners, urging a rethink of this strategy and not to exclude millions of older and vulnerable people from using the telephone as a method of getting repeat prescriptions.

Both letters can be read below.

The letter to Sir Steven Stevens.

Dear Sir Simon,

Re: Exclusion of the Elderly and other vulnerable people

The National Pensioners Convention is the largest campaigning organisation in the UK representing around 1.5 million older people. We work for the benefit of all pensioners – now and in the future – in order that they may have dignity in retirement.

We are appalled at the press article at the weekend that states NHS England are giving new guidance to GP surgeries to abandon taking requests for repeat prescriptions by phone with effect from 1 September.

As a publicly funded body, your duty is to ensure equality of access to all services under your umbrella. This duty is now severely undermined by encouraging access to repeat prescriptions only online or by personal visit.

The rush to move to online services is damaging to older people as they do not engage with technology whether that is because of cost or other reasons. The same may be said of other vulnerable groups in society that have no access to online facilities. For NHS England to force this upon the older generation of patients within GP surgeries is either remarkably naïve or uncaring.

Likewise, the difficulties older people have in travelling to GP surgeries is a burden they really don’t need right now. The same difficulties would be experienced by those with a variety of disabilities. We are very concerned that in the light of COVID-19 and the physical, mental and emotional well-being of those who have spent months in lockdown, that medication will not reach those it should.

We urge you to re-think your strategy and encourage GPs to retain the option to access repeat prescriptions by phone. Exclusion is becoming the norm and we must work together to ensure that we maintain the traditional accesses whilst introducing new ones slowly and consciously.

There is little time left until 1 September and we expect that as a publicly funded body you will carry out an Equality Impact Assessment and let us have a copy before moving to implementation on that date.

Yours sincerely,

Jan Shortt
General Secretary

The letter to Professor Martin Marshall.

Dear Professor Marshall,

Re: Exclusion of Elderly and other vulnerable patients

The National Pensioners Convention is the largest campaigning organisation in the UK representing around 1.5 million older people. We work for the benefit of all pensioners – now and in the future – in order that they may have dignity in retirement.

We are appalled at the press article at the weekend that states NHS are giving new guidance to GP surgeries to abandon taking requests for repeat prescriptions by phone with effect from 1 September. Indeed, we have examples of GP surgeries already warning patients of the change.

Older and vulnerable people have had a stressful time during COVID lockdown, and some are still needing to shield because of their underlying health conditions. For the majority of this group in society, online access is not an option, either because of cost or other reasons. A phone call is a quick, easy way of ordering a repeat prescription when needed. To have that access now taken away is at best naïve, at worst, uncaring.

Likewise, the attendance in person at a GP surgery is something that is currently very difficult. Some surgeries may be miles away from home with a restricted bus service that may take hours to do a round trip. Already feeling poorly, this is not a trauma we believe the RCGP would support, given that your organisation is about improving patient services and experiences.

The same difficulties would be experienced by those with a variety of disabilities. We are very concerned that in the light of COVID-19 and the physical, mental and emotional well-being of those who have spent months in lockdown, that medication will not reach those it should.

We urge you to stop and think about what GPs are doing to their communities by swiftly repeating the mantra of NHS England – a publicly funded body whose duty is to ensure equality of access to all the services under its umbrella.

Exclusion is becoming the norm and we must work together to ensure that we maintain the traditional accesses, whilst introducing new ones slowly and consciously.

We enclose a copy of our letter to Sir Simon Stevens, NHS England and await his, and your reply.

Yours sincerely,

Jan Shortt
General Secretary