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3rd November 2021

NEWSLETTER TO ALL PATIENTS – TELEPHONE SYSTEM & PATIENT ACCESS

Dear Patients of Memorial Medical Centre,

It is prudent of us at this time to write to you all to keep you updated and informed of the issues, proposals and possible solutions regarding the frustrating experiences many of you have suffered in calling the practice.

We are aware that there have been difficulties in reaching a Receptionist on the telephone for various reasons. We understand that these issues you have suffered include some of the following:

- Not being able to reach the call queue and receiving the engaged tone on multiple occasions
- Eventually reaching the call queue but then taking over 30 mins to move up just 1 place in that queue
- Being in the call queuing system and then being inexplicably cut off without reaching the reception team
- Having calls that have just rung out, appearing that no one at the practice is answering the phones

We appreciate and are aware of the frustration and upset this is causing when trying to reach us to simply book an appointment or to speak with a receptionist. We would therefore like to communicate with you and keep you updated as to why these issues are occurring and what we are doing about them to try to reduce the number of problems, whilst attempting to improve the system to make it easier for you to contact us.

Call queuing / engaged tone: The call queue is purposely set at a maximum of 10 patients only. We have monitored this previously and know that more than this will result in patients waiting for longer periods of time than you are currently experiencing and therefore incurring potentially additional costs for the call. We know the engaged tone is frustrating and it can be a matter of calling at the right time to reach the queuing system. We do apologise for this and are looking at various ways in which we can improve this experience – these are detailed as follows:

- We did try an automated message that informed patients when all appointments had been taken in an attempt to reduce the call volume and so that patients would not need to make multiple call attempts to only later find out that all the appointments had been taken already after waiting in the queue for a long time. We have trialled this for a period but have realised that this has potentially caused further issues and patient frustration.
- We are in conversation with other external agencies to provide additional support to our telephone lines, to hopefully improve the ease by which patients are able to get through to the practice – we will update you all further should this be possible

Queue holding times, being cut off and calls ringing out: It is extremely frustrating to reach the queuing system to only then be held at one position in the queue and to not advance within a reasonable time frame or – even worse – to have your call cut off for an unknown reason or not even answered and entering the queuing system.

- We have reported these faults and issues to the phone service provider and are in constant conversations with them to rectify these problems.
- We will provide a further update if and when these faults have been rectified

Please be assured that we are doing everything we can to review, improve and provide a sustainable system. It has been a somewhat turbulent time within Primary Care and GP Surgeries and you will have all seen the news, read the articles and have witnessed feedback from patients regarding patient access and appointment availability. Most of that information you have seen has probably been critical of GPs and how practices are currently being managed. We would therefore like to cover these issues with you as we feel it is important to tackle the perceptions from both sides of the coin. We do value patient feedback enormously but also take great stock in ensuring our patients are well-informed.

Fundamentally, there is no denying or getting away from the fact that GP Practices Nationally – including Memorial Medical Centre – are struggling to keep up and meet the current demand. We understand the reasons, we understand the frustration. Patients want to see their GP face to face after an extended period of Covid lockdown and telephone appointments. Patients want and need that physical interaction with those that look after their healthcare. People will have conditions and illnesses that they have delayed seeking treatment for because of Covid, but the time has come to venture out and seek help. As the country has opened up more, so has the level of demand for GP interventions and advice.

Unfortunately what hasn't changed are the resources available to us to meet that demand. We have the same numbers of staff; we can only manage so many calls to the practice per day; we only have so many GP appointments available and we have been restricted in offering face to face appointments to ensure patients seen at the practice are not unnecessarily asked to attend if and when things can be dealt with via the telephone. We have also needed to 'catch up' on those test requests and examinations and services that were delayed throughout the pandemic.

So what have we done?, you may ask:

- We have provided additional appointments each day, per GP, via telephone calls.
- We have continued to provide face to face care to patients that were deemed in clinical need.

- We have continued to refer patients to secondary care / specialist opinion when needed.
- We have provided continuous Cervical Smear, Cancer Care and Childhood Immunisations throughout the entire pandemic.
- We have provided administrative support answering the enormous amount of additional paperwork generated by the lack of being able to see patients face to face.

In addition to the services on offer as described above, Memorial Medical Centre has also implemented the following:

- We are actively now increasing our staffing levels, employing an additional GP, more nursing team staff as well as crucial additional Administration Staff
- We have reviewed and re-vamped our appointment system to maximise the number of appointments that we could offer on the telephone, face to face and online.
- We are looking to improve and resolve the current telephone system as previously mentioned within this newsletter. Updates will follow.
- We have commenced the rollout of our seasonal influenza vaccination programme at the practice, with clinics being held regularly and at weekends.
- We have maintained our home visiting service to housebound patients and our commitment to the nursing homes on a weekly basis.

Whilst we know and appreciate that there is a lot of frustration within the community surrounding appointment availability and access to the GP staff, we hope you can all appreciate that we are doing as much as we can within particular restrictions and constraints to continue to provide you with the best service possible. We know there are situations in which we could potentially improve and we ask that you please be assured that we are working as hard as we can to do so.

We thank you for your understanding and for your patience at this time.

Yours Sincerely

Practice Management Team
Memorial Medical Centre