

*Self referral to NHS services.*

It would be fascinating to know how many patients are really aware of the wide range of services provided under the NHS umbrella, and whether or not they think it is allowable to self refer to any particular service. This is not something most patients are likely to feel confident about. Higher levels of patient self referral should ease the burden on GPs and NHS administrators, while risking that patients seek what may be inappropriate services and perhaps fail to get timely medical advice.

Most patients are best advised to discuss their medical problems with their GP before doing anything else. Some patients may do this with their community nurse. A few may be in contact with a specialist nurse, and any of these professionals will no doubt help to make any referrals to other services if this is needed.

Most services such as physiotherapy, continence advisory, counselling, podiatry, pain clinics and Orthotics generally do not seem to take self referral unless patients have already been seen. Self referral is generally more appropriate for patients who have already used a service and where both patients and clinicians understand each other's needs.

There are exceptions, particularly where voluntary sector funds help pay for the service and self referral is written into the contract.

This seems to work well in many cases, but there is a traditional reluctance within the NHS to encourage it. The local speech & language therapy service takes self referrals. This doesn't mean anyone can demand an appointment without justification!

In response to the call to ease the workload on GPs, if more services within the NHS were to

publicise and explain their existence, and if Service Managers accepted more self referrals from patients, this could be a positive step for everyone. We want to know what you think. Contact The Editor if you've a view.

*Right first time, or come back later?*

Most will know that Social Services provide home-care, day centres, meals on wheels, laundry and similar services. When recent increases in charges were announced, users were reassessed to establish how much they should pay. There were a few of instances where users were badly hit by the increases. On conducting repeat assessments some of the first assessments were found to have been incorrect, and most cases now appear to be happily resolved. If anyone has experienced a large increase in their Social Services bills which they do not understand it may be worth requesting a second assessment.

Anyone contacting the local 'Emergency, Out of Hours' number who is not already on Social Services' books will be told to wait until normal office hours. They've obviously not heard of the Trades Description Act there!

West Berkshire Council apparently already have spent all this year's budget for Disability Facilities Grants, the one that pays for home adaptations. This is partly because of a carry over of jobs from last year. How can any budget run out within the first three months of the financial year? This is not the first time this budget has fallen short. It is long overdue for the Council to take action to sort this out.

*Open meetings; the Pilgrims progress ...*

We were delighted that Dr Hamid Sultan attended our Open Meeting on 5th June and gave members an insight into his work and motivation as an additional local Consultant in Neuro-Rehabilitation. He works alongside Dr Collin covering the West of Berkshire. We are most fortunate to have a growing department of clinicians, keen to work with the voluntary sector. We look forward to both Consultants holding clinics in the new Newbury hospital when it opens in Spring 2004.

Catherine Mountford, Director responsible for Commissioning Neurosciences in Thames Valley Strategic Health Authority, joined our Open Meeting on 8th July. We are delighted to learn that, by the end of this year, the number of Neuro-Surgeons at Oxford will have increased from five to six and a half whole-time-equivalents. This remedies our regional unit currently having the lowest ratio of surgeons to patients in the entire British Isles. It is important that the associated care pathway is now re-examined and that clinicians refer any patients in need to the expanded service.

Members keenly pressed our visitor on the low number of local Consultant Neurologists, and the lack of any coherent overview about specialist neurology nurses in the region, among many other issues. With Specialist Commissioning Directors established there is now a clear structure with which we can work. However, before any new NHS activities can be paid for, securing the funds requires all the 15 Primary Care Trusts in the region to agree. This will be a major challenge at every turn.

Speakers on 30th July were Clare Stafford, Reading PCT, and Phil Prynne, Continence Advisor, West Berkshire. We will report on this in our next Newsletter. In the meantime, try to get along to our AGM on 4th September and to our Meeting on 4th December!

*Signposts to the surf.*

Our thanks go to Thames Valley Primary Care

Agency for distributing 1000 of our Website information cards, which signpost addresses of all the major neurology voluntary groups.

*Neuro Conference 2005.*

Following the great success of our last conference we have decided to hold another, but not until March 2005. Keep your diaries clear, and don't book any holidays for that time, as you definitely won't want to miss it!

*Stroke and Epilepsy the next priorities.*

We are making good progress in preparing for the next rounds of our health and social care needs survey. This will cover the conditions of stroke and epilepsy. Such activity requires approval from the local Ethics Committee, and needs to be done carefully and professionally. We are delighted that Newbury PCT has asked Dr Eamonn O'Moore, Public Health Specialist, to spend time with us on this important work.

*Diary dates to note:*

Thursday 4th September. **AGM.**  
**Speaker. Diane Newman**, Chairman,  
Cambridgeshire Neurological Alliance,  
**'Making an impact on central health policy'**.  
7. 15 p.m. for 7. 30 p.m. at Newbury Mencap.

Thursday 4th December. **Open meeting.**  
1. 45 p.m. for 2. p.m. at St Joseph's hall.

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