

DHSC rejects NHS pension reform proposals

The Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) has announced that it will not be proceeding with reforms to the NHS pension scheme in England and Wales. The DHSC is claiming that measures introduced in April 2020 have already done enough to reduce the problem of senior doctors being forced to turn down extra shifts in order to avoid large tax bills.

The DHSC announcement came in response to a consultation that opened in 2019 to examine proposals to give doctors more control over the rate at which their pensions grow. The proposals included 'flexible accrual', which would allow them to reduce their pension contributions to fit within their annual tax-free pension savings allowance, and 'contribution recycling', which would enable NHS employers to convert contribution savings into additional pay.

The pension flexibility proposals were intended to resolve problems faced by high-earning doctors as a result of the introduction in 2016 of a tapering of their annual tax-free pension savings allowance. The standard annual allowance is £40,000, but tapering arrangements reduced it to £4,000 for the highest earners, which resulted in staff shortages as many hospital consultants and GPs reduced their hours or made plans to retire early.

However, according to the DHSC consultation response, the proposed reforms are no longer necessary.

This is because the 2020 Budget raised the threshold at which tapering of the tax-free pension allowances applies, so that from 6 April 2020 doctors were able to earn at least an additional £90,000 before they risked breaching the threshold and incurring tax bills. In practice, this means that up to 96% of GPs and 98% of hospital consultants (as well as many other high earners in the NHS, such as senior managers) are now no longer within the scope of the taper.

The DHSC claims that this raising of the threshold at which tapering applies has done enough to restore incentives among high-earning doctors, and that it is a simpler and fairer solution than the proposed introduction of flexible accrual and

contribution recycling, which will therefore not now be implemented.

However, many responses to the DHSC consultation called for the pension allowance taper to be abandoned, claiming that it was hard to understand. Commenting on the DHSC decision not to proceed with the reforms, the British Medical Association pensions committee believes that the decision was a wasted opportunity to reform the complex pension taxation system that disincentivises our most experienced doctors from offering their full potential to the health service and their patients.

Read more about the announcement at: <http://on.ft.com/3rs5cOK> and <http://bit.ly/38jrHhs>



Warning over impossible NHS targets for English dentists

The British Dental Association (BDA) has warned that unrealistic NHS activity targets risk putting hundreds of practices out of business and damaging long-term patient care. The BDA has called on the Government to abandon imposed NHS targets in England, which it says are impossible to meet due to the impact of Covid-19.

The BDA had refused to sign up to the new plans that came into effect at the beginning of 2021, which would mean practices faced stiff financial penalties if they failed to hit 45% of their pre-pandemic NHS activity between 1 January

and 1 April 2021. In an open letter to the Health Secretary, the BDA demanded that activity measures are dropped with immediate effect.

Currently 2,732 practices (41%) are operating below their targets, and there have been over 19 million appointment delays since lockdown. Dental surgeries are handling fewer appointments, in part due to the need for strict social distancing and decontamination measures. The BDA also recognises that, despite stringent safety measures, many patients still have concerns about returning to dental surgeries. It warns that practices will be forced

to prioritise routine check-ups in order to hit NHS targets rather than address the backlog of more urgent cases.

The approach in England differs from that in the other UK nations. The Welsh Government has not set a target, while in Scotland and Northern Ireland targets are half the level set in England. The Welsh Government has also set aside funding for ventilation equipment to help practices increase capacity safely.

Read more about the targets at: <http://bit.ly/3sZV5kg>

PCNs in England received £80 million vaccine payments in February

NHS Business Services Authority (NHSBSA) has warned that the process used to manage Covid-19 vaccine payments is very different from the existing payment processes GP practices use that extract data directly from the GP record.

Covid-19 vaccine payments are administered using a specialised process that requires GP practices to enter and validate data relating to vaccine delivery and calculate payments using the NHSBSA 'Manage Your Service' system.

As part of the vaccine payment process, Primary Care Networks

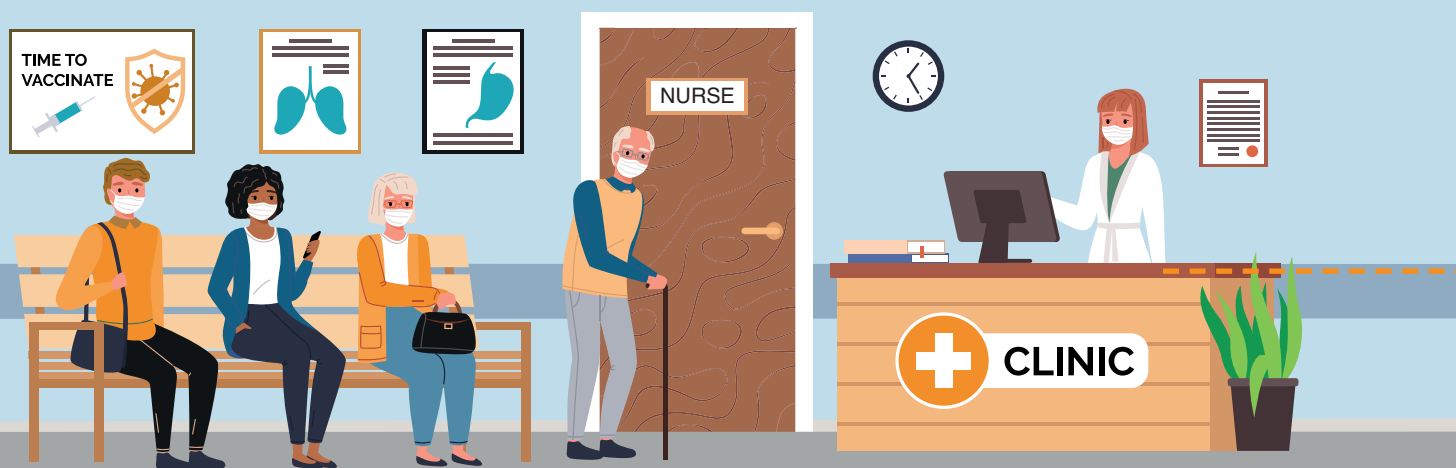
(PCNs) have nominated a lead practice to receive the payments and distribute them to other practices in their network according to the terms of the collaboration agreement signed by those practices. In most cases the payments are expected to come through on the same date as the lead practice's normal payments.

In February 2021, PCNs in England received payment for delivering around six million doses of Covid-19 vaccines between 14 December 2020 and 31 January 2021. The payments amounted to around £80 million in total, with PCNs receiving

£12.58 per vaccination, as well as a supplement for each dose administered in a care home. The supplement was also payable for vaccinations administered in a care home to care home staff. However, supplements are not payable if staff members received their vaccination in other settings, such as hospital hubs.

On average, each GP practice was likely to have received around £12,000 for vaccines administered in December 2020 and January 2021.

Read more about the payments at: <http://bit.ly/3cbJdoP>



In brief...

Rise in DIY dentistry

The British Dental Association (BDA) has warned that the sharp rise in sales of DIY dental kits is due to government restrictions introduced since March 2020, which have resulted in patients opting to treat themselves. The warning comes after Boots revealed that sales of at-home dental kits for lost fillings and caps increased by 87% year on year in Q4 2020. The BDA has said that dental practices can currently only see a small number of patients due to Covid-19 restrictions.

<http://bit.ly/3cfdbbk>

More GPs considering quitting the NHS due to Covid-19

More than half (51%) of GPs working in the NHS are considering quitting or taking early retirement due to the impact of working through the pandemic, according to research from medical defence organisation MDDUS. Around 81% of GPs claim that their day to day work has been disrupted due to staff needing to self-isolate, while 29% believe infection control measures have impacted their ability to care for patients. As a result, many GPs are claiming the pandemic has negatively affected their mental health and desire to work for the NHS long-term. Separate research from GPonline has indicated workloads in general practice have continued to increase significantly. Overall, practices across England provided an extra 400,000 appointments in the first three weeks of 2021 compared with the same period in 2020.

<http://bit.ly/3rtg2Uz>

Pension rules for locum GPs relaxed

The Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) has confirmed that locum GPs will have longer to declare pensionable income in 2021/22 in response to Covid-19 pressures. Usually, locum GPs have to submit paperwork to NHS Pensions declaring pensionable income within 10 weeks of a work session in order for it to count towards their pension. However, the DWP temporarily relaxed the 10 week deadline in April 2020 as locums were struggling to submit paperwork on time due to the impact of the pandemic on general practice workloads. The DWP has confirmed the 10 week rule has been suspended for 2021/22.

<http://bit.ly/3bnM7Yu>

Primary care to share cost of employing mental health workers

The BMA and NHS England have confirmed that the Additional Roles Reimbursement Scheme (ARRS) has been expanded and will cover funding for mental health workers from April 2021. Under the terms of the 2021/22 GP contract, PCNs will only be required to cover 50% of the cost of hiring mental health workers, with the remaining 50% covered by community mental health trusts. PCNs will be entitled to one full-time mental health practitioner in 2021/22, increasing to three practitioners by 2023/24. With the agreement of the mental health provider, PCNs can also opt to hire a children and young person practitioner who would be funded on the same joint basis. <http://bit.ly/3t2xq2K>

More pharmacy closures in deprived areas

Four times more pharmacies closed in deprived parts of England in 2020 compared with more affluent parts of the country, according to research from the Pharmaceutical Journal. Of the 202 pharmacies that closed in 2020, 81 closures took place in the 20% most deprived neighbourhoods in England. In comparison, just 19 pharmacies closed in the 20% most affluent areas. The research has also indicated that despite rising demand for pharmacies during the pandemic, the highest number of net closures for five years was recorded in 2020. Many pharmacies have closed as a result of financial pressures due to the decision to freeze funding for community pharmacies until 2023/24. <http://bit.ly/38htAew>

GPs and pharmacies urged to work together to support vaccine rollout

NHS England is urging GP practices and community pharmacies to work together to deliver the rollout of the Covid-19 vaccination programme. A number of GPs have previously argued that Covid vaccine deliveries should not be expanded to pharmacies, as GP practices have the capacity to deliver more vaccinations than they are currently receiving. GPs have also said that pharmacies do not have access to necessary data about at risk patients. However, NHS England has confirmed that GPs and pharmacies are working to the same standard operating procedures when delivering the vaccination programme. <http://bit.ly/2ObNiBp>



Further measures to free up GP practices for Covid-19 vaccine

NHS England has set out various measures to ensure that GP practices have the capacity to deliver Covid-19 vaccines.

The measures reduce the workload of practices involved in the vaccination program. For example, NHS England has instructed Clinical Commissioning Groups (CCGs) to suspend locally commissioned services, except where they are specifically supporting the vaccination program. This also includes services providing related

Covid-19 support, such as reducing hospital admissions. Budgeted payments for services that are suspended will be protected along with minor surgery DES income until March 2021 to allow capacity to be used for other services. Quality and Outcome Framework (QOF) points will also be protected. As well as protecting practice income, the measures provide a temporary funding boost for Primary Care Networks (PCNs) involved in the vaccination program. During Q1 2021, PCNs with at least one practice providing Covid-19 vaccinations will receive 72p per patient in the first quarter of 2021. Funding for PCN clinical directors will quadruple from January until March 2021.

NHS England has set out what it considers to be the greatest priorities

for general practice in Q1 2021. These include ensuring general practice remains 'fully and safely open' and reducing appointment backlog. Support will be available through the Covid-19 Capacity Expansion Fund, which will provide PCNs with £150 million in total to support the expansion of general practice capacity. In addition, NHS England has postponed the introduction of the new standardised specification for extended access, which was due to start in April 2021. Extended access will now become part of the Network Contract Directed Enhanced Service in April 2022 at the earliest, to prevent disruption to the vaccination program.

Read more about the measures at: <http://bit.ly/3c9wFhD> and <https://bit.ly/30mOtRO>

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Dental practices at breaking point due to Covid-19

The British Dental Association (BDA) has called for more support for NHS and private dentists. It has warned that the future of many dental practices is uncertain due to the impact of Covid-19. Falling patient numbers, staffing issues and Government targets have combined to put many practices at risk of closure.

The ongoing effects of the pandemic and the most recent lockdown have led to a sharp drop in the number of patients willing to visit the dentist. A YouGov survey carried out in January 2021 revealed that 45% of patients were less likely to seek routine care when due a check-up compared to before the restrictions came into force, and 16% are less likely to seek help even with urgent problems such as swelling or acute pain. Nearly half of adults in England (46%) would be likely to

cancel a routine appointment if they had one booked during lockdown.

BDA survey data also found that 79% of practices have seen an increase in cancellations or missed appointments since the start of 2021, with 43% saying they are seeing higher levels of no-shows than earlier in the pandemic. Staff availability is also an issue for three quarters of practices, with staffing levels affected not just by sickness but by staff who are self-isolating or unable to work due to childcare issues.

Dentists are also one of the few businesses on the high street that are not receiving business rates relief, further compounding their financial problems.

Read more about the survey at: <http://bit.ly/3sXxZed>