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Patients have struggled to access general practice during the pandemic, Healthwatch reports

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The covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated access problems in general practice and patients have reported finding it difficult to book appointments and access treatment, a report by Healthwatch has found.¹

The patients watchdog said that GPs must prioritise telling patients that they are open for face-to-face appointments wherever possible.

Its latest report looked at how covid-19 had changed the way people access their GP and how this affected their experience of care. It was based on 10 089 people's experiences of GP services between April 2019 and December 2020 and 458 local Healthwatch reports about GP services during the same period. It also used data from a survey of 2431 people in England, undertaken between 22 and 24 January 2021, about their experiences of accessing GPs during the pandemic.

Healthwatch found that while remote appointments were more convenient for some patients, they didn't meet everyone's needs, with some patients left "worried that their health problems will not be accurately diagnosed," the report said. Wherever possible, Healthwatch said that GPs should offer patients a choice of the type of appointment they would prefer whether it be video, face-to-face, or a home visit. The report also found that some patients struggled to get appointments for regular health check-ups, treatments, and drug reviews, meaning that some were unable to manage their condition.

Responding to the report Richard Vautrey, chair of the BMA's GP Committee, said that throughout the pandemic GP practices had been open, seeing patients face-to-face whenever it was clinically necessary to do so. "We're acutely aware that remote appointments don't work for everyone, as this report highlights, but it's important to dispel the myth that patients without access to the internet have in some way been abandoned and simply cannot access their GP," he said.

"Waiting times throughout the NHS have been a struggle during the pandemic, and we empathise with patients who have had to seek more help from their GP practice as hospital appointments and procedures are delayed.

"This is indicative of a much wider problem that has plagued the entire health service for decades, and something that is responsible for the majority of the points raised in this report—a chronic lack of resources and funding."

Vautrey added that on top of their day-to-day work, GPs and their teams had coordinated a vaccine rollout and successfully delivered the biggest ever flu vaccination campaign.

1 Healthwatch. GP access during covid-19: a review of our evidence: April 2019-December 2020. 2021. www.healthwatch.co.uk/sites/health-watch.co.uk/files/20210215%20GP%20access%20during%20COVID19%20report%20final.pdf.

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