NEWS

Patient records can be shared across practices and with 111 after NHS relaxes rules

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The BMJ

GPs will now be able to access records for patients registered at other practices during the coronavirus epidemic in a major relaxation of current rules.

The move will allow appointments to be shared across practices, and NHS 111 staff will also have access to records to let them book direct appointments for patients at any GP practice or specialist centre.

The change in policy has been initiated by NHS Digital and NHSX to enable swift and secure sharing of patient records across primary care during the covid-19 pandemic. It means that the GP Connect¹ system, currently used by some practices to share records on a voluntary basis, will be switched on at all practices until the pandemic is over.

In addition, extra information including significant medical history, reason for medication, and immunisations will be added to patients' summary care records and made available to a wider group of healthcare professionals. Usually, individuals must opt in but following the changes only people who have opted out will be excluded.

Richard Alcock, interim director of primary care technology at NHS Digital, said the changes would give more flexibility to GPs and other staff whose regular working patterns are disrupted.

He said, "Patients will now be able to have appointments booked at practices other than where they are registered as well as at a number of different healthcare settings. For that to work, however, their new clinicians will need to have swift access to pertinent medical information, such as a previous medical history or drugs prescribed, to treat them safely.

"We have produced guidance² with NHSX for GP practices to help them enable the GP Connect change quickly and without any hassle.

"This step is crucial to support clinicians so that they can give timely, accurate clinical advice at a time when they are already under unprecedented stress and having to work in completely new ways to deliver care."

NHS Digital said the changes will only apply during the covid-19 pandemic.

It said: "On expiry of this notice, GP suppliers will be instructed to revert to previously existing local sharing only on GP Connect and the summary care records will revert back to requiring prior explicit consent for the sharing of additional information."

Neil Bhatia, a GP and data sharing expert who runs a website informing patients about NHS data sharing,³ said he backed the policy given the circumstances.

"Sometimes it takes a crisis to roll out something that is a good idea and GP Connect is one of those," he said. "Prior to covid-19, they were hoping to encourage practices to do this bit by bit. The pandemic just accelerated it."

Bhatia said the policy differed to previous attempts to roll out NHS data sharing, such as the National Programme for IT and care.data, partly because of the uniqueness of the pandemic, but also because the data processing is time limited, only for direct care purposes (and not research or commercial interests), and preserves data privacy safeguards. When patients ring 111, they are told that their record can be accessed and asked if they agree to it.

"From my point of view, as a data protection person, I don't have a problem with it," Bhatia said. "I don't think it will take much to convince practices to allow this to continue voluntarily whenever that time comes."

Farah Jameel, GPC Executive Team member at the BMA, said: "The NHS has shown itself to be incredibly adaptable, and we hope these changes will help in making sure patients, regardless of where they live or what they need, will continue to get the care they deserve."

1 NHS Digital. GP Connect. 24 April 2020. <https://digital.nhs.uk/services/gp-connect>.

2 NHS England. COVID-19: Increased patient information for health and care professionals. 23 April 2020. www.england.nhs.uk/coronavirus/publication/preparedness-letters-for-general-practice.

3 NHS Data Sharing. www.nhsdatasharing.info.

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