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ACUTE PERSPECTIVE

David Oliver: *Daily Mail's* campaign on general practice won't help GPs or their patients

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For months several UK national newspaper titles have been carrying exhortations for GPs to return to seeing more patients in their consulting rooms and scale back their online and telephone consultations.^{1 2} I have often found the papers' tone to be unpleasant, highly critical, or downright hostile. Any attempt to understand or explain is often buried in the prose well below the inflammatory headlines.

The *Daily Mail's* recent campaign for a "right" for all patients who want face-to-face GP appointments to get them exemplifies the problems with this combative approach. This week the *Mail* claimed a "win" in its campaign, with England's health and social care secretary, Sajid Javid, announcing that GPs will be incentivised to offer more face-to-face appointments, with "league tables and hit squads for those that fail."

The *Mail* has backed its campaign with a survey of 1000 citizens, stratified by age group, geography, and party voted for. It headlined some fairly measured findings, with "85% of respondents saying that they should be entitled to a face to face appointment and not 'fobbed off' with a remote consultation by phone or video."³

More recently the *Mail* ran a front page headline saying "Just a single GP for every 2000 patients,"⁴ which was based on a House of Commons Library report about a "postcode lottery" in GP access.⁵ The fall in GP numbers over the past decade, at the same time that more people have tried to access general medical services, is not news. Health policy think tanks, health services researchers, and doctors' leaders have been saying this for some time.^{6 7}

Mail writers have campaigned for the government to honour its 2019 Queen's speech pledge to train 6000 more GPs. But we are way off target currently.⁸

Buried deep in some of the reports we find explanations of national covid-19 policy explicitly telling GPs to move more to remote consulting and triage. But even NHS Digital's figure of 58% of consultations now being held face to face has been aggressively challenged.⁹

Stories repeatedly mention GPs working "part time," as if they were slackers, or comment that women of childbearing age shouldn't be in the job, saying we should "demand they work a minimum number of hours in return for taxpayer funded training" (although that training includes several years of working as doctors providing services). They also make a point of discussing doctors' remuneration as some kind of scandal.¹⁰ But this avoids the reality

that even "part time" GP work can be equivalent to full time working hours in many other professions.

Finally, on 13 October, the newspaper's front page claimed "Victory for the *Mail* as GPs freed from covid rules," when Javid was "set to tear up social distancing rules in surgeries" and enable more face-to-face consultations.¹¹ Yet NHS Digital data show that monthly GP consultation numbers are already as high as at any point in history.¹²

The *Mail* claims it wants to help doctors. But it seems to have no interest in listening to the majority of GPs, or the organisations that represent them—such as the Royal College of General Practitioners or the BMA—to understand doctors' pressures, reasons, and solutions. If you are not listening to a group you claim to support then that isn't support.

The campaign won't do anything to improve morale among GPs or help the *Mail's* readers understand the pressures on general practice. Nor will it help patients.

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- 9 How many face-to-face GP appointments are REALLY happening? Health officials admit some remote consultations are wrongly getting recorded as being in-person. Mail Online. Oct 2021. <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-10082279/GP-consultations-held-phone-falsely-recorded-face-face.html>
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- 12 NHS Digital. Appointments in general practice. <https://digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/appointments-in-general-practice>.