



NHS GPs using Daisy Surgery Line - our contribution to a running press story

The issue of NHS GPs using 0844 numbers has been widely covered over the weekend by [The Daily Mail on Saturday](#) and [The Sunday Mirror](#). Each has focussed on different aspects of the story.

The Daily Mail article shows that **NHS England** is starting to get to grips with enforcement of the revised terms of the GP contract introduced in 2010. This develops on a story first published by the [Warrington Guardian](#).

The Sunday Mirror article stresses the role of **Daisy Surgery Line**, led by **Matt Riley**, who has appeared as an advisor to Lord Sugar in the last two series of **The Apprentice**. We wait to see if Mr Riley has retained Lord Sugar's confidence for a third appearance in the 2013 series, beginning on 7 May, or if perhaps he has heard "*the familiar catch phrase*".

The GP contract provisions

At last, it seems that **NHS England** is starting to make it clear that its contracted GPs cannot use 0844 (indeed, any 084) numbers, because they are almost always more expensive to call than geographic numbers. The only exceptions are a small number of patients who pay an even greater penalty charge for calling geographic numbers outside the terms of their chosen Call Plan. We wait to see how **Daisy Surgery Line** will react to this development.

Daisy is quoted in the **Sunday Mirror** piece, as suggesting that "*NHS regulations permit their use provided our GP customers are satisfied that, having regard to the arrangement as a whole, their patients will not be paying more than a local rate call*". Given the facts about the cost of calling 0844 numbers, one must wonder from what source any GP could take its information, so as to be 'satisfied' of an untruth. Literature published by **Daisy Surgery Line** may offer a clue!

The principle of access to NHS services being free of any charge to the benefit of the service provider does not rest on the capability of Mr Riley and his staff to convince their customers that the 5p per minute subsidy gained from using a 0844 number is obtained at no cost to callers. **Ofcom** has recently announced new regulations to require that this amount, known as the "**Service Charge**", be declared whenever a 084 (or 087 / 09/ 118) number is published.

The actual value of the Service Charge varies according to the type of number. Those used for Surgery Line are in ranges equivalent to 5-7p per minute. The caller's own telephone service provider adds an "**Access Charge**", which currently is up to 36p per minute. The new Ofcom regulations will cause these two elements of the charge for a call to be "**unbundled**".

The need for enforcement action

The actual terms of the NHS GP contracts require GPs "*to ensure that, having regard to the arrangement as a whole, persons will not pay more to make relevant calls than they would to make equivalent calls to a geographical number*".

Ofcom has stated the truth about the "Service Charge", its present concealment within a "bundled charge" and the fact that in the near future it will have to be declared openly. There can no longer be any possibility of doubt that 0844 (or indeed any 084) numbers may not be used by NHS GPs.





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Informed Choice in the NHS

The **Sunday Mirror** article refers to surgeries offering a choice of number. It must be understood that this introduces the principle of “**you get what you pay for**” to the NHS - where it has no place! NHS services, of the best possible quality, are accessed on the basis of need, not payment.

Under the '**two tier**' arrangement, promoted by **Daisy**, the 0844 number (including a “Service Charge”) gives full access to the facilities of the **Surgery Line** system. This includes the ability to take one’s turn in an orderly queue of callers, possibly at considerable cost. The geographic alternative number is a single line, so one is very likely to be unable to get through at busy times, as only one person can be waiting to be dealt with on this number.

Contrary to popular myth, the terms of the NHS GP contract do not permit this arrangement. As quoted above, practices are required to take steps to “**ensure** that” callers pay no more than the cost of a call to a geographic number. Providing an inferior cheaper option to a costly service does not in any way meet the terms of the **NHS Constitution**. If, as stated on its website and as quoted in the Sunday Mirror article, **Daisy** offers GPs “**the option of a geographic number**”, then NHS GPs must use this **in place of** the prohibited 0844 number, not as a second class alternative option.

The obvious solution

A **03 number**, also offered by **Daisy**, provides **Surgery Line** users, and their patients, with the benefit of exactly the same features as a 0844 number. Because calls to 03 numbers are charged at exactly the same rate (if any) as calls to geographic numbers, there is no “Service Charge” to provide a subsidy towards the cost of the special features and other system costs.

If a practice is prepared (or compelled) to satisfy its obligations to the NHS, whilst also meeting the full cost of the system to which it contracted with **Daisy**, then switching to the 0344 equivalent of its 0844 number is the obvious route to take. This switch causes no disadvantage to **Daisy**.

We wait for **Daisy** to promote this solution to its existing NHS customers, find an alternative or continue to argue that the benefits of its system warrant suspension (or alteration) of the principles of the NHS. We sincerely hope that the latter course will now be abandoned and would be interested to hear the views of Lord Sugar on one of his advisors following such a path.

Daisy Surgery Line has also argued to Ofcom that the transparency offered by the “**unbundled tariff**”, then proposed but now confirmed, was contrary to the interests of patients, because they may be reluctant to call their GP if they knew what they were paying.

References and comment

All of the above remarks may be sustained by an extensive schedule of references to published telephone tariffs and other published materials. These have been omitted from this document only for the sake of convenience.

We will be very happy to produce all necessary materials to sustain the points, which have been made, at greater length and with references, elsewhere.

