

**End of the line for the hospital bedside phone rip-off**

Providers of hospital bedside phone services exploit friends and family contacting a patient in hospital by use of 070 telephone numbers. This rip-off will now shortly be brought to an end.

These are currently un-regulated premium rate numbers, intended for a wholly different purpose, which are widely used for scams and other rip-offs.

Ofcom has today confirmed that (subject to EU approval) it will be proceeding with radical revisions to the rules covering these numbers – see [Draft statement: Personal numbering – Review of the 070 number range](#).

Once these rule changes are in place, it will no longer be possible to use these as premium rate numbers. Call charges will be aligned with those which apply to calls to other 07 (mobile) numbers. This change will make what many are currently misled into believing to be true.

A significant effect will be to end use of these numbers for outright scams. It will also enable the genuine use of Personal Numbering (“follow me”) services, if there is a genuine demand for this type of service, without it being provided at the expense of the caller.

If the providers of hospital bedside phone services wish to have the services subsidised at the expense of those calling in to patients, they will have to do so using genuine regulated premium rate service numbers, i.e. those beginning 084, 087 or 09 – depending on the level of Service Charge they wish to apply.

The cost of calling these numbers must always be clearly declared wherever the number is given. This consists of a Service Charge particular to the chosen number, plus the Access Charge set by the caller’s telephone company for all calls to premium rate numbers.

Any choice to use a premium rate number requires a careful decision, considering the benefit derived and the cost to the caller.

Service Charges (including VAT) may be up to 7p per minute for 084 numbers, up to 13p per minute for 087 and up to £3.60 per minute for 09. The maximum benefit to the user excludes VAT.

Access Charges are currently around 13p per minute (maximum 15p) for landlines and typically 55p per minute (maximum 58p) for mobiles.

Use of this mechanism is therefore only really justified when the rate of Service Charge is relatively high. For example, a call to a 084 number could cost up to 65p per minute whilst yielding only 5.83p per minute to the user of the number.

We see this as posing a difficult problem for companies such as Hospedia, which have been doing very well out of the 070 rip-off. The costs of calling currently vary enormously and there is no requirement to be transparent about the costs, nor what is earned from the calls.

We await news of how providers of hospital bedside phones will react.

Our view is that the mobile phone provides the most effective means for hospital patients to remain in contact with friends and family. We have urged Leagues of Hospital Friends to step in with a scheme to offer free use of donated handsets to those without a phone of their own.

