



**A "Service Charge" for telephoning your NHS GP
- now being openly declared**

With effect from 1 July, the "Service Charge" component of the cost of calling a 084/087/09/118 number will have to be declared by the person who benefits from it - the person being called. See ["Clear Call Rates for Everyone"](#).

Because NHS services are delivered "free at the point of need", with no charge levied on the patient by the person providing the service, use of 084/087/09 numbers has long been outlawed for NHS GPs. In England and Wales, this was expressly prohibited by changes to the GP contracts - made in 2009 and finally effective from 1 April 2011.

We recently published [a list of 183 NHS GPs in England](#), which **NHS England** had still failed to draw into compliance with the terms of their contract, despite some [strong words in November 2013](#).

Now we find that these GPs will be ready to declare the fact that they impose a "Service Charge" on callers. This always was wholly contrary to the principles of the NHS, but now it is declared for what it is.

A very clear example of this, along with breaches of other basic principles, is found on the website of [Dr Glencross' Surgery](#), in Huddersfield.

We comment on the points made there:

- ft** The quality of a NHS service and the way in which it is funded are two separate issues - funding a 'better system' through payments from patients is never an option in our NHS.
- ft** Whilst there may be a few exceptional cases in which calls to 0844 numbers are bizarrely discounted or calls to geographic numbers subject to a premium, any pretence that the "arrangements as a whole" do not make calls to 0844 numbers more expensive could not be supported by evidence.
- ft** Use of an alternative (cheaper for most) number to provide an inferior service - no opportunity to have the call answered in turn, having to wait for there being no queue of callers - is a clear example of a two-tier NHS. This point was addressed most clearly in the NHS England letter of November 2013 - *"The NHS does not offer distinct tiers of service based on ability to pay"*.
- ft** From 1 July the Service Charge payable on calls to 0844 815 1022 will be **7p per minute**. This is in addition to the Access Charge imposed by the caller's particular phone company, each of which sets its own terms. (The rate of 7ppm is as advised by TalkTalk Business to Ofcom - we have no idea of how it may be relevant to refer to a rate of 2p per minute. The ASA regulations demand reference to the rate applicable to the "numbers given")

This is an especially appalling example of how the improper use of rip-off 084 numbers continues, despite the fact that those who use them must now declare their charge. (We have many other examples from various sectors.)

This also demonstrates how NHS England still fails to get on top of this disgraceful abuse of NHS patients by GPs, despite our supportive efforts in 2013.