fair telecoms campaign

news release



The 'two-tier NHS' - GPs lead the way

There are some who argue that "patient choice" in the NHS includes the right to pay for improved access, so long as free access is available to those who cannot afford it. This is the approach being followed by many GPs who use the expensive 0844 telephone numbers, alleging that this enables compliance with their NHS contracts. Many Primary Care Trusts support this view. **We disagree!**

Contractual changes introduced in April 2010 effectively prohibit new use of 084 numbers (given the current state of telephone tariffs). Existing users had 12 months to migrate to the equivalent 034 number, or otherwise ensure that callers paid no more than for a call to a geographic number. Those using systems which rely on the features of non-geographic numbers, can migrate, without penalty, as a variation to their arrangements. Calls to 03 numbers meet the requirements.

Practices migrating from 084 to 03 lose the subsidy indirectly provided by patients. They have to meet the full cost of their chosen telephone system, in the same way as all other GPs. This step is thereby "reasonable" for a NHS provider. The full cost of the system, including a 'per call' cost for use of the non-geographic number, may however be seen as being too great for a practice to bear.

Earlier this year, **Daisy Group**, providers of the **Surgery Line** system, offered its customers the opportunity to add a single line geographic number to operate alongside their 0844 number. Providing this option was said to "ensure compliance" with the terms of the NHS contract 1 , reflecting Further Guidance issued by the Department of Health in February 2012 2 .

It is for the GPs who take this option, the PCTs which support it and the Department of Health which suggested it, to explain how giving patients the option of paying for better access to NHS services is a valid application of the principle of "patient choice".

The benefits of calling the 0844 number are widely promoted; the additional costs incurred are less well advised, although now acknowledged. The financial benefits to the practice are beyond dispute, as seen by the failure to migrate to 03, in order to comply with the contractual terms.

NHS GPs which publish a geographic alternative to their 0844 number are offering their patients a

TWO TIER NHS SERVICE

This is, of course, an oxymoron. The NHS offers only one level of service - the very best that can be afforded to every patient on the basis of need. Tolerance of the two tier approach can only mean that the NHS is starting to be dismantled. This appears to be starting at its front door!

Notes

- 1. See the highlighted section at the end of this document.
- 2. See the third bulleted point on this page
- Please refer to <u>Daisy Surgery Line</u> to confirm that the 03 migration option and the respective features of the 0844 and local numbers are indeed as I describe above.
- ft See also this more detailed briefing.

