



The truth about GPs with 0844 telephone numbers

We respond to a most entertaining item in the Hackney Gazette:

[Hackney GP surgery faces £25,000 penalty for dropping expensive 0844 number](#)

The article highlights many of the mis-conceptions which have impeded enforcement of the contractual changes that prohibited GPs from using 084 numbers from 1 April 2010.

1. By entering into an arrangement for use of an expensive number in 2011, the practice was in direct and clear breach of the terms of its NHS contract.
2. BT customers do not get a cheaper rate by using the 0844 number. They normally pay nothing to call geographic rate numbers, as against 15p + 5.105p per minute to call the 0844 number. (There is a very high penalty charge for BT customers who call outside the terms of their chosen call plan, which includes calls to geographic rate numbers. These cases are treated as "anomalous outliers" for the purposes of the GP NHS contract, and thereby disregarded.)
3. There are no NHS guidelines which permit use of a 0844 number alongside a geographic (020) number. Use of expensive telephone numbers is prohibited, regardless of whatever alternative means there may be for contacting the practice.
4. There is no requirement whatsoever for the practice to terminate its contractual arrangements. It has the option of replacing the 0844 number with a number charged to callers at the same rate as that for geographic calls, within the terms of its contract with Daisy.
5. The fact that the Service Charge paid by patients is used to pay for the telephone system is of no consequence. NHS providers are providing with funding for the purpose of delivering their NHS services, any surplus is retained by the practice. It is the responsibility of the practice to spend its money wisely and to provide the best NHS service possible.
6. In these challenging times, many people and businesses have to cope with costs increasing faster than income. It is sad to hear that this Surgery Manager is unable to cope and feels it necessary to breach the principles of the NHS and the specific terms of the NHS contract.
7. The practice is required to pay for the telephone equipment installed at the surgery, whether through continuing its regular lease payments or as a lump sum on termination - it has that choice. It is not permitted to obtain the money through payments by patients on calling an expensive telephone number.

This practice and all other NHS practices using 084 numbers were given 12 months (up to 1 April 2011) in which to switch to 03 (or 01/02) numbers. This practice chose not to do so and has been benefitting from (illegal) subsidy of its telephone costs since then.

The fact that this option existed was put beyond doubt by a statement from Daisy Group earlier this year - see [GPs are now free to give up 0844 telephone numbers](#). Daisy Group is quoted in the Hackney Gazette article as confirming this position.

(see annotated copy overleaf)





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Hackney GP surgery faces £25,000 penalty for dropping expensive 0844 number

✉ by Emma Bartholomew, Senior Reporter

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12:34 PM

The manager of De Beauvoir – the last GP surgery in Hackney using a “lucrative” 0844 phone line – would like to get out of the contract, but is faced with a £25,000 penalty.

In 2005 De Beauvoir Surgery entered a seven-year contract with telecommunications provider Daisy, in return for an expensive hardware phone system which allows many patients to call in at the same time.

At the time the NHS primary care trust was urging all practices to do the same.

But while other surgeries have now come to the end of their contracts, De Beauvoir still has three years to go.

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Because it moved from practice in Englefield Road to a larger eight-room premises in Hertford Road in 2011, the surgery was forced buy itself out of the old contract and enter into a new five-year contract upgrade.

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While BT customers get a cheaper rate by using the 0844 number, it can cost up to 35pence per minute for mobile users meaning callers can run up high costs if having to wait on the line at busy periods.

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While De Beauvoir practice follows NHS regulatory guidelines by providing an alternative local 020 number, Cllr Ben Hayhurst criticised the surgery for advertising the 0844 number.

At a Health in Hackney scrutiny meeting he said: “At De Beauvoir it (the 0844 number) comes up on Google as the number one number, on their website it is the first number they give you, when you call them they don’t tell you about the cheaper number, there is no recorded voice message to let you know about it, why haven’t those practical steps been gone through to try and minimise the use of that number at the surgery?” he asked.

Fiona Erne, the deputy head for primary care for NHS England for North, Central and East London, told him they had asked the surgery not to mention the 0844 number on the NHS website.

“In terms of their own website we have less control over that, we continue to speak to the practice and advise them to take some of the actions you have advertised,” she said.

But surgery manager Maggie Brynjolfsson said they couldn’t sustain the cost of leaving the contract and had tried everything to meet NHS requirements.

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“Of course we would rather be out of the contract, we get so much grief about it,” she said.

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“We would rather exit it now, but it would mean buying a new telephone system and we are still paying off this one, the money you get back goes towards paying for your telephone system, that’s how it was sold to us.

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“What people forget is that now we have to phone mobiles back now all the time our costs increase all the time, you can’t expect a surgery to keep paying back and paying back, so while people are happy to swap to mobiles it is an added expense to us.”

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A spokesman for Daisy said the inflated charges are added on by the mobile providers and that the £25,000 penalty was not for exiting the contract but to pay for the equipment.

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“They have the option to change the number free of charge to change to an 03 number, but if they have a revenue share that’s when they would pick up the cost of the telephone system,” she said.

