

74 Friday, October 19, 2012 Kent Messenger (KM)

**MESSENGER COMMENT**

GP phone cost makes us sick

**M**OST of us are struggling to cope with rising household bills. Juggling steep living costs against an ever-decreasing budget is becoming more and more tricky.

But when avoidable charges relate to contacting your GP surgery, it's enough to make anyone sick.

How could additional costs just to seek help or make a doctor's appointment have ever been justified?

The sick should not be penalised for who knows where such a policy would end – B&B charges for hospital stays?

Prescription charges, parking at hospitals, lotions, potions and pills are all money-draining essentials many have little option other than to pay out for if they're not exempt.

But up to 40p per minute to make an appointment or ask for advice is one health care remedy which is particularly hard to swallow.

You'd expect to pay those sort of fees for premium-rate competition lines but that's through choice and not need.

It is morally wrong to charge a person to call for medical help and some urgent attention is needed to cure the system of this ill.

In 2009, the Department of Health prohibited surgeries from installing an 084 line and asked those already operating a premium line to review their contracts.

The guidance did not go far enough, it should have been outlawed, because despite the directive many GPs have continued to operate the galling call-charging system.

It's one practice that should be abolished.

**'Up to 40p per minute to ask for advice is one health care remedy which is hard to swallow'**

**YOUR KENT MESSENGER**



084... Aylesford Medical centre



084... St Luke's Medical Centre



084... Larkfield Health Centre

**GPs will have to find a cure for costly phone calls**

by Anna White  
[awhite@thekmgroupp.co.uk](mailto:awhite@thekmgroupp.co.uk)

DISGRUNTLED patients have registered a common complaint with their GPs – expensive telephone numbers.

Unhappy NHS users have complained that more and more surgeries force them to dial 0844 to make an appointment or seek medical advice.

Callers have to pay around an extra 5p a minute when they phone the premium rate number from a landline – and up to an astonishing 40p per minute on mobiles.

At least three GPs in Maidstone and Malling use the 084 code, including St Luke's Medical Centre in Holland Road, Thornhills Medical Practice, Martin Square, Larkfield, and Aylesford Medical Centre, Admiral Moore Drive.

There are more than 30 other practices across Kent which have similar contracts.

In 2009, the Department of Health announced all NHS providers are prohibited from using telephone numbers which charge patients more than the equivalent cost of calling a standard number.

Surgeries tied into a contract with an 0844 provider had until December 2010 to review their



More than 30 surgeries in Kent are using 084 numbers

Picture: Giaran Griffin

position and take steps to meet the new criteria.

Thornhills Medical Practice has applied to revert to the area's standard 01732 code and Susan Smith, manager at St Luke's Medical Centre, said it too is considering changing the number.

Christian Nelson, practice manager at Thornhills, said: "We had complaints from our patients about having to pay more, we listened and are due to change our number soon."

Aylesford Medical Centre was unable to comment at the time of going to press.

Thornhills patient Ron Edwards, from Ditton, was delighted to learn the call charging system would soon stop.

Mr Edwards and his wife Betty, both 86, are housebound.

He said: "I have been part of a

group of people who have been campaigning against these call charges.

"It's severely unfair how people who rely on medical help are charged expensive rates."



Reporter  
**ANNA WHITE**  
 Email: [awhite@thekmgroupp.co.uk](mailto:awhite@thekmgroupp.co.uk)

**PREMIUM RATE**

Patients' anger at price of calls



**PAGE 7**

'We're working to solve the problem'

SURGERIES in Kent and Medway are monitored by the area's Primary Care Trust.

A spokesman for the service said: "Some surgeries took out contracts for 084 numbers several years ago because the call management systems enabled GPs to improve their service to patients.

"However it was not made clear that calls from providers other than BT or from mobile phones could cost more.

"We are currently working with the Kent Local Medical Committee and the remaining practices that have 084 numbers to find a resolution.

"Some surgeries have installed an additional geographical number and we will be looking to recommend this type of arrangement."

The spokesman added that some surgeries opted for an 084 code because it allowed them to add various options and lines.