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press cutting



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A GP practice which netted thousands of pounds from a premium rate phone line for appointment bookings has reverted to an 0118 number.

The 35p-a-minute line may have cost patients close to an estimated £28,000 a year. The seven-year contract could have seen callers collectively forking out in the region of £200,000.

From Monday those wanting to make an appointment for Earley's Brookside and Chalfont, and Winnersh surgery, which form the Brookside Group Practice, can call (0118) 966 9333 rather than 0844 477 3005.

Members of Earley Neighbourhood Action Group (NAG) have been campaigning against the 0844 numbers at the practice for more than two years.

NAG chairman Jim Willis said: "We got them to agree to the switch after some fairly heavy lobbying.

"We wrote letters to, had conversations with, and attended meetings at the PCT (primary care trust) and Department of Health to make this happen and I'm pleased we got a result.

"We have saved people a lot of money they never should have been paying in the first place. In days of austerity, one has to consider every penny. And the NHS should not have these premium numbers – it's as simple as that. It was a difficult situation, but we got it sorted."

Mike Parting, business manager at the practice, explained the surgeries had returned to 0118 because its contract with the

COMPLAINTS: appointment line cost 35p a minute

Premium rate at surgery dropped

'Hassle' puts people off making an appointment

DIFFICULTY making an appointment is the main reason people delay going to their GP, according to new research.

Forty-four per cent of people questioned in the South East said problems getting an appointment might stop them going to a doctor about a symptom they thought

might be serious.

The survey was carried out by Cancer Research UK and supported by Tesco as part of their Charity of the Year partnership.

In the same survey in 2010, fewer people cited emotional reasons – such as being too scared to visit their doctor – but more people

now have difficulty making an appointment or finding time to see their GP.

Reading Walk-in Health Centre offers access to a GP on a walk-in basis to both registered and unregistered patients from 8am to 8pm, 365 days a year.

Call (0118) 902 8300.

0844 operator expired.

Mr Parting said: "We are keeping the system which our patients appear to be very happy with, but are using an 0118 number. The practice has invested a lot of money to provide a sophisticated system that deals with the calls for all three surgeries. The system is expensive to run and we won't make money using an 0118 number."

The *Reading Post* estimated callers would have been charged around £200,000 during the contract, based on each of the practice's 26,500 patients making

three one-minute calls every year to their surgery. If the practice only received a small proportion of this, they could have made a significant profit – 10 per cent equating to around £20,000.

Mr Parting would not confirm the figures, saying: "I have no comment as to whether the system is good value, but £20,000 would equate to £1 per patient per year."

In 2010, the Government introduced legislation banning surgeries from charging more than the local rate for calls.

The 0844 prefixes are still

allowed if people are not charged more than the equivalent cost of calling a geographical number, but campaigners say callers dialling 0844 numbers from a mobile or fixed price plan can still find themselves paying more.

Two Woodley GP practices, Parkside and Woodley Health Centre, abandoned 0844 in 2010.

Mr Willis added: "The company that operates these premium phone lines NEG (Network Europe Group) is making an absolute killing on this. And the use of these numbers is widespread across the country."