

Rt Hon Sajid Javid MP
Secretary of State for Health and Social Care

Tuesday, 21 September 2021

Sent via email

Dear Secretary of State

All at the BMA were deeply shocked at the horrific attack of a GP practice in Openshaw, Manchester, by a patient which left staff with terrible injuries. This attack comes on the back of escalating anti-GP sentiment being pushed by sections of the media and a rising tide of abuse and threats directed at NHS staff, especially in GP practices.

A staggering two-thirds of GPs (67%) [have told us](#) that their experience of abuse, threatening behaviour or violence had got worse in the last year, with half (51%) saying they had been personally verbally abused, and 67% witnessing violence or abuse against other staff. It is not only GPs that are facing both threats of violence and violence itself, all those working across general practice are experiencing the same. A survey by The Institute of General Practice Management found that a shocking 75% of GP staff experienced abuse from patients on a daily basis, and 13% at least once a week.

This is wholly unacceptable, particularly given the tireless work of general practice staff who have served the nation assiduously and loyally over the past 18 months of the pandemic. GPs and their teams led the COVID vaccination programme - the most successful in the history of the NHS - which has delivered 90 million vaccines, saving tens of thousands of lives. General practice is also managing large numbers of vaccination queries and issues relating to the backlog in secondary care which further adds to pressure on day-to-day access.

The narrative that GPs are refusing to see patients face-to-face is as dangerous, as it is inaccurate, and that is why it is so disappointing to see most recently, your public support for the Daily Mail's campaign and repeated comments elsewhere. The reality, as you must know, is that with the constraints of the size of GP practice premises, there are limits on how many people can safely be present in a waiting room while adhering to appropriate infection control measures. GP practices, in the same way as hospitals, are using telephone, video and online consultations to assess patients (in accordance with NHS England guidance) and provide them with physical face-to-face consultations when this is needed. Many practice premises are too small and poorly ventilated, and with high circulating levels of Covid, we have a duty to protect our older and clinically vulnerable patients from becoming infected when they attend their GP surgery.

In addition, there are simply too few GPs and practice staff in under resourced premises to meet the huge surge in demand that practices are currently experiencing, which will be exacerbated by the Covid vaccination booster programme. Telephone triage is one way that practices are keeping their head above water to ensure that patients see the right health professional and make appropriate use of GP time.

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Furthermore, while it may suit some sections of the media to portray appointments as being reduced, the fact is that GPs are seeing more patients than ever, working longer hours than ever. The NHS' GP appointments data shows there were nearly one million more appointments in July 2021 than pre-pandemic levels (July 2019). Whilst GPs are being vilified for offering telephone consultations, they are doing so purely for the safety of the patients and which in fact [our survey shows](#) is more exhausting for GPs and result in longer days. It is soul destroying for GPs and their staff to hear the narrative that they are "closed". I would also note that it was your predecessor as Secretary of State who, in August of 2020, advocated that all GP appointments should be remote by default, a position that we opposed as being too simplistic.

Just last week you announced the Covid booster programme, it will be GPs and their practice teams who will be leading this additional work. Given the magnitude of delivering millions of vaccines over the coming months, together with increased patient demand during the winter, it is vital that the public are made fully aware of just how much strain practices are under and how the service may have to change in order to manage, what is in effect an unmanageable workload. We are not "[back to completely normal](#)" and it is wholly unrealistic to suggest that practices can, under current conditions, return to pre-pandemic ways of working.

The BMA's general practitioners committee have written to you twice to specifically highlight the increasing number of verbal assaults on GPs and primary care staff and have yet to receive a response, in addition to those calls, I am requesting you:

- (i) urgently meet with BMA GP committee leads to discuss our concerns and what support GPs could be offered to manage the unprecedented rise in workload to meet the needs of all patients.
- (ii) attend an emergency summit with the BMA to discuss the unacceptable level of abuse being levelled against GPs and their staff on a daily basis, and to discuss what further steps, including new legislation, must be taken to keep healthcare workers safe. We are calling for:
 - The maximum sentence for assault against emergency workers to be increased from 12 months' to 2 years' imprisonment.
 - Verbal abuse against emergency workers to carry a heavier punishment, even when the threat of physical violence is not present.
 - Alongside this, a comprehensive national violence reduction strategy, building on the existing National Violence Prevention and Reduction Standard, should be developed and introduced to support staff across both primary and secondary care.
- (ii) condemn the onslaught of abuse and media scapegoating of GPs and their staff.

Rather than endorsing a media narrative which scapegoats GPs, show them your support for their dedication. Without this support more and more GPs will leave the service, making the manifesto pledge of 6,000 additional GPs inadequate, even if were achievable.

It is too late for the staff in this specific practice in Openshaw, but I call on you now to speak openly and unequivocally in support of general practice, to meet with our GP Committee Chair, and to attend an emergency summit to address the situation before it gets much worse. I look forward to hearing from so that we can begin to work together on addressing the huge challenges ahead with honesty, integrity and compassion for all.

Yours sincerely



Dr Chaand Nagpaul CBE
BMA council chair