

Doctor's Corner

There is a lot in the news at present concerning the Government's discussion with GPs over this year's contract and extended opening hours.

Four years ago the GP contract changed dramatically to move to a contract that is based on quality measurements over a range of illnesses, and at the same time passing the duty to provide out of hours cover to the Primary Care Trust. The Government did not believe how well GPs were already performing under these quality measures, and as a result found GPs earned more than was predicted. As a consequence, for the last 2 years we have had a 0% rise whilst still absorbing the increasing costs of the practice.

Now the Government is determined to go back on the contract for Out of Hours, and instead of improving the quality framework, has insisted that money is taken away from quality to be earmarked for extra hours.

The Government is obsessed with patient surveys, and claims the results of various polls shows this is what patients want. In fact the polls show only a minority of patients want extra hours, so it is important that questionnaires are taken for what they mean. We have asked the Patients' Panel to conduct a survey of our own in the practice.

In our own practice, we have continued to provide a service from 8 am until 6pm every weekday offering an appointment to everyone who feels they need to be seen on the day. When we finished with Saturday mornings only a handful of patients were making use of the service.

We have now got to look at providing additional hours. At present the Government is only interested in ensuring a GP is sitting at the desk - we are not sure the Government has thought about the nursing and backup service we would normally expect in our full service.

Indeed, it doesn't seem to matter which doctor. From my point of view the most worrying aspect of Government policy is that it appears to pay little regard to the importance of continuity of care - the facility for the doctor you know to be involved long term in your care. The longer in the day one is expected to work, the less the service can be provided by a single doctor or practice. We have heard of "Polyclinics" with collections of "specialist" GPs, and I expect this will be the way of the future.