

22 January 2023

Amanda Pritchard, CEO
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Sent via email

Improving access to NHS care during the cost-of-living crisis

Dear Amanda

We welcomed NHS England's recent work on the cost of prescriptions, as it addresses a real concern for the Academy Patient and Lay Committee (APLC) about patients' ability to access healthcare – which is being affected by the ongoing cost of living crisis. This crisis is exacerbating significant health inequalities and affects many patients. We believe that this is an important issue and if we can support and promote your campaign, please do not hesitate to ask.

We would also like to recommend other solutions that would improve access to healthcare for all patients during the current crisis. This is based on a survey we carried out over recent months, which identified these issues as examples of the difficulties patients face. The issues and recommended solutions are grouped under three key headings below.

Staff information and training

Staff working for the NHS (particularly prescribers and administrators in patient-facing roles) need clear information on the challenges that are faced by people who are less well-off and the solutions needed to help improve access for this group.

For example, it is important to ensure staff are aware of the following issues and solutions:

- For prescriptions and over the counter medicines – patient-facing staff should be aware of which medicines are cheaper over the counter and make this clear to patients.
- For patients who pay for their repeat prescriptions, ordering 2-3 months' supply, where possible, will be far more cost and time effective than one.
- The cost of travel, such as public transport, taxis or parking, can discourage people from attending healthcare settings. Where possible appointments should be local to patients, avoiding complicated and expensive journeys.
- Patients may incur costs if they cannot attend paid work or need to find respite care/childcare to attend appointments. Flexibility about weekend/evening appointments and the ability to bring dependents may help reduce costs to patients.

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- Locally, staff and patients/local community should discuss what possible solutions to cost issues could be helpful and share any examples of good practice more widely.

Appointments at outpatient clinics and GP surgeries

Systems need to be in place to ensure:

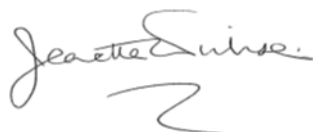
- Freephone numbers are offered for booking/changing appointments.
- Patients are consulted before appointments are made [they will know best about the times/places which will reduce their costs]. Automated appointment letters should not be sent as they risk increasing the number of Do Not Attends.
- As much as possible, patients with multiple morbidities should be offered appointments as a one-stop shop, reducing the number of return trips they need.
- Blood tests and other simple pre-outpatient/surgical check-ups should be offered locally to the patient – e.g. in GP surgeries rather than hospital. When diagnostic tests are being done, it should be checked whether the patient will require any other tests over the next year and whether these can be done at the same time.

Help with costs of transport

- It should be made easier for people to receive help with their travel costs **before** they travel. It may be difficult for many, particularly those on low incomes, to pay upfront – yet currently they are expected to do this.
- The system for claiming expenses is complex – therefore, it is vital that people on low incomes can access free helplines to explain how the system works. All telephone helplines to get advice on help with NHS costs including transport are currently 0300 numbers [i.e. they are currently not free]. Helplines should be free to use.

Please take these comments in the positive spirit they are meant.
We look forward to hearing from you in due course.

Kind regards,



Dr Jeanette Dickson

Chair of Council
Academy of Medical Royal Colleges



Ros Levenson

Chair, Academy Patient
and Lay Committee