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**Practice Update - Summer 2021**

We would like to thank our patients for their support and understanding over the past few months. As you will know from the media coverage General Practice has never been busier than over the spring of 2021. Due to a combination of factors such as patients feeling that it was safe to contact their GP’s again, long waits for hospital appointments leading to additional ill health, and an increase in mental health and social difficulties our reception team have been dealing with an unprecedented number of telephone calls (over 16,000 calls in May alone!). The pressures in General Practice has been County wide, and led the Sussex CCG (our local branch of NHS England) to issue an open letter to all practices to share with their patients acknowledging the situation.

For us the challenge has been even more acute as we are in the middle of a transitional period with Dr Wolfle and Dr Whichello retiring on 31st March and then new GP’s Dr. Mifsud and Dr Roe unable to start until August and September. We have managed to cover most of the vacant shifts with Locum GP’s. None the less we are aware that for some of you the service which you have received from the practice over recent months has not been at the high level to which you have become accustomed, and to which we are committed to returning. We apologise to anyone who feels that their requests have not been dealt with adequately. We welcome your feedback both good and bad as we look to improve our access over the coming months. The easiest way to feedback is probably via the friends and family questionnaires on our website.

For the time being we are still being advised by the Sussex CCG to triage all appointment requests. However we are aware that with so many of our patients double vaccinated and with local COVID cases consistently low over the past 2 months it is now much safer than it was to see patients face to face. We are therefore delegating the triage in some cases to our Patient Services Team who can now for example book direct face to face appointments for lumps and rashes. Most conditions still require telephone triage or online triage (via e-consult) which is why the PST will ask you for the reason for contacting the surgery when you call. Currently about half of our appointments are face to face, in order that we can keep the waiting room as free as possible these appointments tend to take priority over telephone appointments, which is why we cannot give specific call back times for phone appointments.

Another positive from the gradual easing of COVID restrictions is the gradual opening up of our Groombridge Surgery. We have had Doctors running appointments and seeing patients in Groombridge for the last 3 months. We propose to start running nurse appointments and have a manned reception desk in Groombridge on Monday, Wednesday and Friday mornings when the COVID restrictions ease further in July. We will continue to use the Nurses room at the back of Groombridge Surgery as our ‘hot hub’ where we see patients with symptoms which could be COVID because it can be accessed from a separate entrance at the back of the surgery. We do not have plans to reopen the Dispensary at Groombridge, we cannot see how the Dispensary at Groombridge can be made COVID secure and the Dispensary team have found working in a single site at Hartfield to be safer and better supported. For those patients who are unable to arrange for their prescriptions to be collected from Hartfield we will arrange a home delivery service.

Our commitment to training the next generation of Clinicians remains. Dr Harriet Roe received news that she has successfully passed her GP exams and coursework this month, Harri has one more month with us as a Registrar and will return as an Associate GP in September. Dr Alexandra Sinclair is a junior Dr in Foundation Year 2 and Kathryn Trochimiuk is a Paramedic Practitioner, both are attached to the practice for the next few months, to learn with us and to work with us. We find that having junior clinicians on the team helps to keep us up to date, adds freshness and enthusiasm to our team, and develops the NHS workforce of the future.

The past 15 months has been exhausting for our whole practice team. We feel very fortunate to have such committed and supportive staff across the practice. We are also aware that the last 15 months has been exhausting or stressful for a lot of our patients. We feel very fortunate to have such supportive and understanding patients. It is well known amongst mountaineers that the journey down the mountain is usually more dangerous than the journey up, we must continue to be vigilant as we start to lead more normal lives with COVID. We value the doctor-patient partnerships we have built with you over the years and remain firmly committed to providing you with high quality primary care for many years to come.

We wish you all a happy and healthy summer.

Dr Matt James and Dr Victoria Rittner