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Surgery Snippets – August 2021

Hello,

It has been a very long time since a Surgery Snippets has been published. I did consider trying to do this early in the pandemic but the world was changing so quickly that it would have been impossible to keep up. It now feels like the right time to bring back the Snippets as Covid restrictions ease. Covid, however, is not gone and the surgery will continue to work differently from before and all of our staff will continue to work hard to meet the health needs of our patients. I know that the pandemic has taken its toll on everyone – practice staff included – and I want to thank all of our patients who have been so understanding and accepting of the changes enforced upon the practice. I also want to thank all of the staff within the practice who have worked tirelessly and uncomplainingly to make sure we provide the best care possible despite the impact of Covid.

Staff Update

There have been a number of personnel changes in the practice since the last edition of the Snippets across our admin and clinical teams. We also have recently taken on two Modern Apprentices into our admin team and we are grateful for your patience while they learn the workings of the practice. Regrettably, staff have received a significant amount of verbal abuse in recent months and I would ask that patients treat our staff with kindness and respect at all times.

Practice Working

So much has changed in the last 18 months starting with the surgery doors having to be locked as we fought hard to ensure that Covid infection did not spread to patients or staff via the surgery. This was essential as we could not risk losing multiple staff members to Covid infections at one time as this would have crippled our ability to provide any service at all to our patients. The reduction in face to face consulting has been a difficult transition for us and I imagine it has been even more challenging for our patients. Covid has required us to use a total triage approach – this means that patients are unable to book appointments directly for GPs or Advanced Practitioners but instead should complete an eConsult or telephone triage contact for the practice clinical team to assess and work out the best way to help. This allowed us to manage the vast majority of issues without having to see patients face to face and again this has undoubtedly been challenging for patients and staff alike. Please remember that we may respond to your eConsult submission via the email address you provided.

While we have always seen any patient where a face to face consultation was essential it has been clear that for the majority of patient consultations a face to face contact is not required. However, we do not anticipate nor want the proportion of telephone versus face to face consultations to stay as it has been in the last year. With the successful vaccination programme and falling Covid infections we have been seeing more and more patients face to face every week.

This does not mean that all consultations will return to being face to face as there are many benefits for patients and for the practice of having telephone and remote consultations too and we expect to develop a blended model over time. The total triage system will remain in place to help us to make sure we can identify those with the most urgent and serious health issues and those who need face to face consultations while dealing with others via telephone or eConsult consultations. The practice has seen an unprecedented increase in patient contacts since the start of 2021, an increase of up to 40%. From January to May 2021 over 14,000 patient contacts reporting new medical issues were dealt with. In a typical year there would be around 10,000 patient contacts in the same time period. Every member of staff has been working flat out for the last 6 months to make sure that we can meet this demand and this has been difficult.

We do not wish to put a limit on the number of patient contacts allowed each day (which our old appointment system had) and with the new triage system we have never had to ask patients to call back the next day. We hope that this means that patients feel confident to contact us when they feel they need to and that we can continue to provide a high quality service despite all of the challenges.

We have returned to providing all of the core services that we have done in the past. However, due to a backlog of work that has built throughout the pandemic we are still playing catch up with much of this. This includes routine reviews for long term or chronic health conditions and other services such as minor surgical procedures or contraceptive services. We are steadily working away at this but it is quite possible that your usual annual review will be deferred from the usual month that it happens or that there may be a longer wait for any minor surgical procedure within the practice.

Vaccinations

We strongly support the Covid vaccination programme and would urge anyone who is eligible for vaccination but who has not yet had their first dose to go ahead and do this. The vaccine is safe and is proving effective and is building a strong platform to lead the country out of Covid. Please get your vaccine as soon as you can.

Flu vaccinations will also be starting soon (October) and, similarly to last year, the practice will not have the responsibility for giving these to patients and this will again be led by the Health and Social Care Partnership teams. Further updates will be sent out once more details are available. This remains an important vaccination for anyone who is eligible to take each year and I hope we see a very high uptake this year.

A Covid booster vaccination programme for winter 2021/2022 is possible but confirmation and details of this have not yet been published. Again we will update as soon as we have more information.

Preparing for Winter

We are still experiencing some hot weather but the winter months will be upon us before we know it. This is the time when we see the highest levels of illness. There are many things patients can do to try and stay well during the winter months and the preparations should start now. People with long term chronic health conditions such as COPD or diabetes in particular should consider what they can do to stay fit and healthy this winter. It is unclear what Covid infection rates might be in the winter months but it is very likely that many patients will be exposed to other traditional winter infections. The usual spike in winter infections was much less in 2020/2021 due to the Covid precautions in place nationally which reduced the transmission of not only Covid but other viruses too. We may not be so lucky this year.

Our top tips for getting yourself winter ready are:

1. Keep fit – it is important that all patients with long term health conditions keep fit. Exercise is a very important way to prevent illness but also to help your body cope with and recover from illness more rapidly. Even patients with heart or lung conditions should continue to exercise. Remember it is ok to be breathless when you are exercising. For long spells over the last year people have been confined to their houses much more than before. This means that some of the natural fitness people have will have been lost and I would encourage everyone to do 30 minutes of exercise 5 days per week to try and build this back up.
2. Stop smoking – everyone is aware of the dangers of smoking and the risk of developing heart or lung disease and cancer from smoking. However many of our patients still smoke. Stopping smoking can have benefits to your health that can be seen almost immediately after stopping but can also reduce the risk of developing a range of serious and life limiting illness. If you are interested in stopping smoking please speak to one of our local pharmacy teams who will be able to discuss ways to help you quit.
3. If you are overweight, try to lose weight – obesity is another huge concern. This can cause serious health conditions such as diabetes but can also cause a range of other physical issues such as joint pains, breathlessness (from carrying excess weight), sleep apnoea syndrome and acid reflux. Losing weight could lead to less drug treatments being prescribed which then reduces the risk of side effects from taking multiple different drugs. We know losing weight is not easy especially as you get older or if you struggle to exercise. However it is still possible and it can be managed with dietary changes alone. The Healthy Helpings programme in NHS Grampian can provide additional advice and support to patients who do wish to lose weight.