



NHS FREE TO CHOOSE 084 NUMBERS FOR LOCAL PATIENTS

There are many added benefits that telephone systems using 084 numbers have and which patients find helpful, for example better and quicker access. However, there have been a lot of complaints from the general public that they are being penalised for dialling an 084 number. For this reason, the Department of Health announced a consultation exercise on "The use of 084 numbers in the NHS". The consultation closed on 31st March 2009.

In its official response to the DoH consultation exercise, our telephone system supplier, Network Europe Group (NEG), demonstrated:

- For virtually all patients' calls, the local GPs 084 number is not more expensive to call than using an ordinary number;
- More than 4.5 million patients use an 084 number to contact their GP surgery every month;
- When allowed to be given the choice, GPs choose 084 numbers because it allows them to improve access and invest in quality services for patients;
- GPs do not make a single penny of individual profit from 084 numbers.

On 14th September 2009, Health Minister Mike O'Brien MP announced that new legislation will be introduced to ensure that local patients do not pay more than the cost of a local call to contact the NHS. This means that GPs and other NHS organisations will in future remain free to use 084 number based solutions for local services.

Deputy Chairman of the British Medical Association's GPs Committee said:

"Patients who call their surgery because they're ill shouldn't be penalised because they have to call an 084 number, so we're pleased that the phone companies who supply these lines to practices have agreed to ensure that their tariffs are in line with local charges".

The cost of calls to these numbers are regulated for BT customers who are charged up to 5p/min plus a call set up fee to call an 0844 number.

However, it should be noted that other providers' charges are not regulated and may therefore vary so you should speak to your service provider for more information or advice.

Ofcom clearly encourage consumers to contact their own service providers if they are being charged more than the regulated BT rate.

Appletree Medical Practice made, and continue to make, a substantial investment in a new telephone system. Using the 0844 number has enabled us to use more sophisticated equipment in order to make it easier for patients to get through to the practice. This was in direct response to patient questionnaires which highlighted the need to improve accessibility and with the encouragement of the local Primary Care Trust.

We find it disappointing that some service providers choose to charge a premium rate for dialling an 0844 number and can only reiterate Ofcom's advice of contacting your service provider directly if this is the case.