

Patients must not be forced to choose between easier access and continuity of care

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RCGP says that reducing waiting times for a GP appointment must be a priority for politicians and the incoming government

Continuity of care for patients must not be compromised in order to improve GP access, according to a new report published by the Royal College of General Practitioners today.

The RCGP says that reducing waiting times for a GP appointment must be a priority for politicians and the incoming government – but that this must not be delivered at the expense of other GP services, including the long-term care provided to patients with chronic and multiple health problems.

In its new report, "Patient access to general practice: ideas and challenges from the front line," the college examines a wide range of initiatives to increase patient access to general practice – but warns that this can only be achieved with increased funding and significantly more GPs.

The publication comes in the wake of recent analysis by the RCGP showing that on an estimated 67m occasions in 2015, patients in England will have to wait for a week or more to see a GP or practice nurse, due to a lack of investment in general practice and rapidly growing demand,

It looks at the five main drivers for improving patient access to general practice – including maximising the potential of technology such as

smart phone apps and web-based consultations, and extending opening hours by bringing practices together in 'federations' to pool their resources

It also provides case studies of practices that have improved access without compromising patient safety or the quality of care.

The RCGP says that the rise in the number of patients who are finding it difficult to make a GP appointment is being brought about by the aging population and more patients being treated for long-term and complex conditions.

Over 90% of all NHS patient contacts are managed in general practice. This equates to more than 370m patients per year, which works out at 150,000 more consultations per day than even five years ago.

But as patient demand has rocketed, funding for general practice has fallen to an all-time low of only 8.3% of the NHS budget

The UK also has a severe shortage of GPs, with large numbers of family doctors set to retire and insufficient numbers of medical students going into general practice to replace them.

In response, the college has launched its "Put patients first: Back general practice" campaign, in partnership with the National Association of Patient Participation, calling for the share of the NHS budget for general practice to be increased to 11% by 2017 – and an additional 8,000 GPs in England by 2020.

RCGP Chair Dr Maureen Baker said: "It is vital to ensure that patients can see a GP when they need one - but the [waiting times](#) that patients are experiencing are now the subject of national debate and national concern, not least amongst GPs and their teams.

"Access to general practice is frequently cited by politicians as a key issue, and in the run-up to this year's general election parties from across the political spectrum are likely to include promises to 'improve' GP access in their manifesto documents.

"But with general practice already under huge strain and GPs delivering more patient consultations than ever before, turning political rhetoric into practical action will require a significant increase in resources for general practice.

"Improving access to GP services for patients must be a priority for any incoming government but it cannot be used as a trade-off. It is vital that policy initiatives aimed at increasing or enhancing access to general practice focus on both those patients who want to prioritise speed and the growing number of people who would benefit from greater continuity of care with their GP.

She added: "Given the number and range of ideas currently being tested out in general practice in this area, it is vital that projects are properly evaluated, and evidence is gathered and published on what has been shown to work in some areas and what has not.

"Whilst much of this work needs to be taken forward by those implementing ideas themselves, there is a role for policy makers in ensuring that the current burst of initiatives in this area does lead us to a better understanding of how we can improve and enhance access for patients.

"General practice is the cornerstone of the health service – it keeps the NHS sustainable, and our [patients](#) safe. We need to make sure that it is in a position to keep doing so for years to come and this will only be possible with more GPs, more resources, and the tools we need to do our jobs properly."

More information: The report is available online:
[www.rcgp.org.uk/news/2015/febr ... y/A-Z-policy/Patient
%20access%20to%20general%20practice.ashx](http://www.rcgp.org.uk/news/2015/february/A-Z-policy/Patient%20access%20to%20general%20practice.ashx)

Provided by Royal College of General Practitioners

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