



The Consumer Healthcare Association

21 May 2020

PAGB urges NHS to seize 'unique opportunity' for self care

The NHS has a 'unique opportunity' to cement positive changes in the way people use its resources in the wake of the coronavirus crisis, PAGB, the consumer healthcare association, has told MPs.

In a submission to the House of Commons Health and Social Care Select Committee, PAGB Chief Executive John Smith says the pandemic has prompted more people to practise appropriate self care for self-treatable conditions, rather than visiting their GP or local A&E department.

If continued, this shift will free up healthcare professionals to focus their time and expertise on individuals with serious or long-term health conditions that need medical attention, as well as those with Covid-19 symptoms.

"Once the worst of the coronavirus crisis is over and healthcare services begin to normalise, there will be a unique opportunity to embed self care behaviour in a sustainable way," John Smith says in PAGB's [evidence](#) to the committee's inquiry into *Delivering Core NHS and Care Services during the Pandemic and Beyond*.

However, he warns that steps must be taken to manage any backlog of 'unnecessary demand' for health services.

"It will be critical to ensure that those people with self-treatable conditions continue to self care and do not automatically seek medical attention as soon as services begin to normalise again."

Before the coronavirus outbreak, there were an estimated 18 million GP appointments and 3.7 million A&E visits every year for conditions which people could have treated themselves or for which a pharmacist should have been the first port of call.

The cost to the NHS, along with that of unnecessary prescriptions for products which could be bought over the counter, is estimated by PAGB at £1.5 billion a year.

PAGB says the increased demand for over-the-counter products such as paracetamol in recent weeks underlines the important role of non-prescription medicines in tackling milder cases of Covid-19 and in relieving pressure on GPs.

Among the coronavirus-related NHS changes which should be fully embedded in order to encourage self care, PAGB's evidence to the Select Committee cites:

- The shift to a 'digital first' approach, particularly the use of the NHS 111 online service to provide reliable information about options including appropriate self care;
- The increased use of trusted online symptom trackers to help people identify and manage self-treatable conditions, offer advice about over-the-counter medicines and flag up any symptoms which require medical attention;

- The use of telephone and video consultations to allow GPs and other healthcare professionals to assess people and manage demand – although PAGB stresses this should not be a way for individuals to access a GP when they could be practising self care with the support of a pharmacist if required.

In its submission, PAGB repeats its call for a national self care strategy, as outlined in its [Self Care White Paper](#) of last year, and recommends that:

- Community pharmacists should be allowed to write in people's medical records to improve consistency and continuity of care, as well as to increase public confidence in pharmacists' expert role;
- Community pharmacists should be empowered to refer people onto other healthcare professionals where appropriate, so that anyone visiting a pharmacy knows they will leave with either the advice or products they need to manage their symptoms, or an appointment to see another healthcare professional;
- National public health campaigns should prioritise self care messaging, signpost reliable online information and highlight the role of the pharmacy as the first port of call for self-treatable conditions.

John Smith concludes: “[If] the system and healthcare professionals themselves allow people to return to doing what they did before...the unnecessary demand of self-treatable conditions will continue to be felt in primary and urgent care settings throughout the NHS.”

- ENDS –

Notes to editors:

PAGB, the consumer healthcare association, represents the manufacturers of branded OTC medicines, self care medical devices and food supplements in the UK.

For further information please contact Polly Newton, Media and Communications Manager, polly.newton@pagb.co.uk or call 07706 001500.