

Practice Telephone Policy

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1 Introduction

1.1 Policy statement

This policy outlines the use of the practice telephone system and details the procedures for managing calls, telephone consultations and the practice text-messaging service.

1.2 Status

The practice aims to design and implement policies and procedures that meet the diverse needs of our service and workforce, ensuring that none are placed at a disadvantage over others, in accordance with the Equality Act 2010. Consideration has been given to the impact this policy might have in regard to the individual protected characteristics of those to whom it applies.

This document and any procedures contained within it are non-contractual and may be modified or withdrawn at any time. For the avoidance of doubt, it does not form part of your contract of employment.

1.3 Training and support

The practice will provide guidance and support to help those to whom it applies understand their rights and responsibilities under this policy. Additional support will be provided to managers and supervisors to enable them to deal more effectively with matters arising from this policy.

2 Scope

2.1 Who it applies to

This document applies to all employees of the practice. Other individuals performing functions in relation to the practice, such as agency workers, locums and contractors, are encouraged to use it.

2.2 Why and how it applies to them

This document has been produced to provide all staff at Swiss Cottage Surgery with the information they need to ensure the effective use of the practice telephone system, thereby enhancing the level of service offered to the entitled population.

3 Definition of terms

3.1 Triage

Triage in general practice refers to the process whereby the patient is referred to the appropriate clinician for the correct level of care within an acceptable time frame.

3.2 Text-messaging service

Messages sent using the Short Message Service (SMS) over a mobile network.

4 Use of telephones

4.1 Provision

Phones are provided to enable practice staff to communicate with patients, the patients' carers and other service providers to ensure that the expected level of service is delivered at all times.

4.2 Acceptable and authorised use

Practice phones are only to be used for the purpose of practice business. Personal use is strictly prohibited except in the event of an emergency. Calls to premium-rate telephone numbers are also prohibited.

Calls to areas outside the UK are blocked; should it be necessary to call a number, practice manager authorisation will be required.

4.3 Recording incoming and outgoing calls

In accordance with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), the lawful basis for processing data also applies to the recording of telephone calls. In accordance with Article 6 of the Regulation, one of the following must apply when processing any data:¹

¹ [GDPR Article 6](#)

1. The data subject has given consent to the processing of his or her personal data for one or more specific purposes
2. Processing is necessary for the performance of a contract to which the data subject is party or in order to take steps at the request of the data subject prior to entering into a contract
3. Processing is necessary for compliance with a legal obligation to which the controller is subject
4. Processing is necessary in order to protect the vital interests of the data subject or of another natural person
5. Processing is necessary for the performance of a task carried out in the public interest or in the exercise of official authority vested in the controller
6. Processing is necessary for the purposes of the legitimate interests pursued by the controller or by a third party, except where such interests are overridden by the interests or fundamental rights and freedoms of the data subject which require protection of personal data, in particular where the data subject is a child

To align Article 6 with the recording of telephone calls, one of the following must apply:

1. The individuals involved in the call have given consent to be recorded
2. Recording of the call is necessary for the fulfilment of a contract
3. Recording of the call is necessary for the fulfilment of a legal obligation
4. Recording of the call is necessary to protect the interests of the participants or another natural person
5. Recording of the call is in the public interest or necessary for the exercise of official authority
6. Recording of the call is in the legitimate interests of the recorder, unless the interests are overridden by the interests of those involved in the call

When accepting an incoming call or dialling out, staff must advise the caller or receiver that the call will be recorded and give the reason for the call being recorded. To justify the recording, one of the above reasons **must** apply.

At Swiss Cottage Surgery, the data controller is responsible for and must be able to demonstrate compliance with the principles relating to the processing of personal data as outlined in [Article 5](#) of the GDPR.

4.4 Answering protocol

All staff are required to answer the practice telephones in the same manner, answering as follows:

- Use the appropriate salutation – good morning, good afternoon, good evening
- Give your name and ask, “How can I help you?”

- Action the request as appropriate
- If appropriate, place the call on hold (advising the caller that you are going to do so) until you are able to process the request
- Speak in a polite and professional manner at all times

4.5 Taking messages for staff

Should a caller wish to leave a message for a member of staff, e.g. a doctor, staff must ensure that they:

- Annotate the date and time of the call
- Record who is calling, obtaining their name and telephone number
- Record the subject they wish to discuss with the member of staff
- Repeat the information to confirm accuracy

Once the call has ended, the staff member receiving the call can either:

- Send a message (using EMISsystem)
- Email the intended recipient if they are out of the office

For urgent messages, staff must ensure that the message is relayed in a timely manner, ideally in person.

4.6 Abusive or aggressive patients

Unfortunately, on occasion there may be times when a patient calls the practice and speaks to a member of staff in an abusive or aggressive manner. Staff must ensure that they:

- Annotate the date and time of the call
- Ascertain who is calling
- Remain calm, offering empathy
- Determine the reason (if possible) for the aggression or abuse
- Offer solutions if practicable
- Advise the caller that if they persist with such an aggressive and/or abusive tone, the call will be ended
- End the call if appropriate
- Note down a summary in the patient's healthcare record
- Inform the practice manager
- Report the incident in accordance with the practice incident reporting policy or significant event policy

In all circumstances, staff are to demonstrate confidence and compassion, remaining calm throughout the incident. Staff should refrain from being judgemental, instead

opting to show the patient their clear intention to resolve the situation as opposed to attempting any form of reprimand.

If it has been necessary to contact the local police, the practice manager is required to notify the CQC of any incident that is reported to, or investigated by, the police.²

4.7 Supporting the team

Staff who experience incidents of violence or aggression may experience subsequent after effects, which may require support from the team or external resources. Line managers and the practice management team will be required to support all staff members following any incident, no matter how minor it may seem, to ensure that the health and well-being of the staff member is not adversely affected.

4.8 Emergencies

Calls about emergencies should be handled in accordance with the practice's Emergency Telephone Call Policy.

5 Telephone triage

5.1 Process

At Swiss Cottage Surgery, patients telephoning the practice to request an urgent or same-day appointment with a clinician are initially managed using telephone triage. The Doctor will:

- Introduce themselves clearly, stating their name and role at the practice
- Verify the ID of the caller, ensuring that they are the patient or they have the consent of the person they are calling about
- Explain the purpose of telephone triage
- Ascertain as much information as possible:³
 - What is the problem?
 - Where does the problem occur?
 - When does the problem happen?
 - What makes the problem better or worse?
 - What is the time frame for the problem?

² [CQC \(Registration\) Regulations 2009: Regulation 18: Notification of other incidents](#)

³ [Improving triage techniques: A guide for clinicians undertaking telephone consultations](#)

- Consider the possible diagnoses based on the information provided
- Formulate an action plan:
 - Advice will suffice
 - Recommend that the patient visits the local pharmacy
 - Advise the patient that a telephone consultation with a GP is required
 - Advise the patient that a face-to-face appointment with a GP is necessary
 - It is an emergency situation and an ambulance is required
- End the call by providing an overview of the discussion and the plan, ensuring that the patient (or caller) fully understands what happens next and when to expect a call back from a GP (if applicable)
- The patient is to be advised that the GP will attempt to call the patient a maximum of [two times] during the advised time period; if the patient fails to answer the call, the GP will not attempt a third call
- Advise the patient or caller that 'if the condition worsens' they should ring back or call 999 (as appropriate)

5.2 Recording information

As per all patient interactions, staff at Swiss Cottage Surgery must ensure that they record all of the information gleaned during their telephone call on the patient's healthcare record. Equally, if a patient fails to answer the call, this must also be annotated in the individual's healthcare record as it may be needed as evidence should a complaint be raised in the future.

6 Telephone consultations

6.1 Arrangements

At Swiss Cottage Surgery, GPs, nurses and PAs are permitted to conduct telephone consultations with patients.

6.2 Process

Prior to calling the patient, the clinician should read the patient notes on EMIS, familiarising themselves with the notes made during the triage telephone call and any pre-existing medical conditions. The clinician is to then telephone the patient and:

- Introduce themselves clearly, stating their name and role at the practice
 - Verify the ID of the caller, ensuring that they are the patient or they have the consent of the person they are calling about
 - Explain the purpose of the telephone consultation
 - Offer the patient the opportunity to explain what it is they are calling about, using questions and probing as and when required
-

- Seek clarification to any comments the patient has made, eliciting any relevant information
- Determine what it is the patient would like or thinks they need
- Consider a diagnosis
- Determine what treatment and/or medication is required
- Formulate an action plan, relaying the plan to the patient (or their representative)
- Ensure that the patient (or representative) understands and agrees with the plan
- End the call once assured that the patient is happy, advising the patient to call back or call 999 if their condition worsens (based on the advice given)

6.3 Recording the consultation

The clinician is to record the consultation in the individual's healthcare record, ensuring that it is a true reflection of the consultation. Again, if the patient fails to answer the call, this is to be recorded in the healthcare record.

6.4 Prescribing by telephone

Clinicians at Swiss Cottage Surgery who are authorised to prescribe via telephone must adhere to the [GMC prescribing guidance](#):

“Before you prescribe for a patient via telephone, video-link or online, you must satisfy yourself that you can make an adequate assessment, establish a dialogue and obtain the patient's consent...”

Additionally, clinicians are advised that:

“...you may prescribe only when you have adequate knowledge of the patient's health, and are satisfied that the medicines serve the patient's needs. You must consider:

- a. The limitations of the medium through which you are communicating with the patient
- b. The need for physical examination or other assessment
- c. Whether you have access to the patient's medical records”

6.5 Risks

Whilst it is acknowledged that good telephone consultations can improve patient's access to advice and treatment⁴, clinicians at Swiss Cottage Surgery must ensure

⁴ [GMC Remote patient consultations and prescribing](#)

that they fully understand the risks associated with telephone consultations and take the necessary actions to mitigate such risks where possible.

The following are common examples of risks, and action should be taken to avoid them:

- Poor information gathering due to the absence of significant questions
- Inappropriate decision-making, such as premature diagnosis
- Confusion due to poor communication
- Unmet expectations due to unclear instructions/advice

7 Communication failure

7.1 Failure to respond to a call

As mentioned in section 5.1, patients are to be advised that the clinician will attempt to call them twice during the allocated time frame. Should the patient fail to answer the call, the clinician will not attempt a third call. The individual's healthcare record is to be annotated to reflect the failed communication attempt(s).

7.2 Rebooking

The clinician is to message the reception team, asking them to contact the patient to arrange a call when the patient is able to accept a call from the clinician; this will be during the usual times allocated for telephone consultations.

If the reception staff have any concerns, they are to speak to a member of the clinical team, requesting advice. It is imperative that all contacts and decisions are accurately recorded in the individual's healthcare record.

8 Communicating using text messages

8.1 GMC advice

The GMC recognises that text messaging is convenient and can be effective, but warns practices to take the necessary precautions to ensure that the communication method they use is secure.⁵

8.2 Consent

⁵ [MDU Text message communication in general practice](#)

Patients must consent to being contacted by text; this requires a positive opt-in, ensuring compliance with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). Swiss Cottage Surgery will obtain patient consent using the form at Annex A.

8.3 Services offered

Swiss Cottage Surgery will offer a text-messaging service to patients, which will include:

- Reminders of appointments (at intervals prior to the appointment)
- Appointment confirmation (following a booking)
- Clinic cancellation notices
- Reminders of reviews
- Service announcements

Text-messaging services will not be used to communicate patient results.

8.4 Text-message etiquette

Staff must refrain from using 'text speak' and ensure that messages are written in a language that is understandable and unambiguous. Each message should include the following as the final line: "This text-messaging service is unable to receive replies. For all enquires, contact Swiss Cottage Surgery on 0207 7222772 thank you."

Texts from Swiss Cottage Surgery are to be sent from Iplato or Accurx. Under no circumstances are staff (clinicians or administrative) to use their personal mobile phones to send messages to patients.

8.5 Patient awareness

Patients are to be advised that the practice operates a text-messaging service by:

- Including information in the practice leaflet
- Advertising the service on the practice website
- Displaying posters in the practice waiting room/reception area

A poster template is available at Annex B.

9 Summary

Telephone communication is a fundamental element of general practice. Communicating effectively with patients will ensure that the expected level of service is delivered and the appropriate level of care offered in a safe and effective manner.

Annex A – Consent for text-messaging service

Patient consent for text-message communication

Patient details			
Surname		Forename	
Title		Date of birth	
Mobile number			

I understand that I have chosen to use the text-messaging communication service provided by Swiss Cottage Surgery.

I confirm that the service has been explained to me and the kind of information that will be communicated by text message. I also understand that this service is one-way and I am unable to respond via text. Instead, I must contact the practice by telephone should I have a query.

I acknowledge that text messaging is not a secure system and, as a result, there is a possibility that my text may be intercepted by someone else. However, it has been explained to me that no personal, identifiable information will be included in text messages and that it is my responsibility to ensure that my mobile phone contact number is up to date at all times.

Please ✓ the following statements that apply:

The mobile telephone number given is my chosen number for communication

or

The mobile telephone number given is the number of my nominated person

Only complete this section if applicable

Nominated person details			
Surname		Forename	
Title		Relationship	

Patient's name		Date	
Signature			

For staff use only:


The system has been updated to reflect the patient's agreement to text-messaging communication

Patient's name		Date	
Signature			

Annex B – Poster for text-messaging service

Swiss Cottage Surgery

Text-messaging service



<https://pixabay.com/en/text-mobile-chat-sms-980031/>

Did you know that we can send you appointment confirmation and reminders, service announcements, clinic cancellations and review reminders via text?



Dr S Smith, Dr M Abbas, Dr F Entikabi, Dr P Smith, Dr D Beck

2 Winchester Mews,
London NW3 3NP
t 020 7722 2772
f 020 7449 6050
swisscottagesurgery@nhs.net
www.swisscottagesurgery.nhs.uk

We will never send test results or clinical information via text, nor will we use any personal, identifiable information in the message.

If you want to make use of the service, ask at reception for a consent form.