



Surgery Line

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The use of phone numbers that charge the public or patients a premium rate to contact the NHS are to be banned in England, Health Minister Mike O'Brien announced today.

The announcement follows a recent public consultation on the use of 084 numbers in the NHS. Almost 3,000 members of the public responded, demonstrating the strength of feeling on this issue.

Health Minister Mike O'Brien said:

"We have been concerned that some people are paying more than the cost of a local call rate to contact the NHS. It is clear from the feedback we have received that patients support the banning of any number or tariff which is more expensive to call.

"For people on low incomes, and for those who need to contact their local doctor or hospital regularly, these costs can soon build up. We want to reassure the public that when they contact their local GP or hospital, the cost of their call will be no more expensive than if they had dialled a normal landline number."

The Department of Health will work with the British Medical Association's GP Committee over the coming months to integrate the legislative changes into the GP contracts.

Notes to editors

1. The 084 numbers consultation closed on 31 March 2009. A copy of the consultation booklet is available online at: <http://www.dh.gov.uk/en/Consultations/Closedconsultations/index.htm>
2. The Department of Health response to the 084 numbers consultation, published today, is available online at: <http://www.dh.gov.uk/en/Consultations/Responsestoconsultations/index.htm>
3. The ban on the use of numbers charging patients a premium rate to call NHS services will allow a marketplace to evolve where 084 numbers compete alongside 01, 02 and 03 numbers, but where patients will pay no more than the cost of a local call. The ban means that GPs and other NHS organisations remain free to use 084 numbers, providing patients are not charged more than a local rate number.
4. In April 2005, the Department of Health banned the use of premium (0870, 0871 or 09) and national charge rates to call local NHS healthcare services in England. The ban did not extend to other number ranges, as at the time they were not considered 'premium' rate. However, it has now become clear that there are other numbers which can also be more expensive to call than a normal geographical (01 or 02) telephone number.



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5. In December 2006, the Department of Health issued a letter to all Primary Care Trust (PCT) Chief Executives, asking them to consider what actions they needed to take locally to ensure that patients did not pay more than they would if they called a geographical telephone number. It also advised that Ofcom was issuing a new countywide (03) number range, which allows the functionality of a non-geographical number, with the receiver rather than the initiator of the call bearing the extra cost.

6. The ban will be enforced through proposed changes to the GP contract (in consultation with the British Medical Association's GP Committee), and the issuing of Directions to NHS PCTs and Trusts. These changes will be put in place as soon as practicable.

7. It is not our intention to prohibit 'revenue sharing' as part of our proposals – the important thing is to ensure that patients are not being made to pay more than the equivalent cost of calling an 01 or 02 number. 'Revenue-sharing' arrangements allow for a proportion of the money paid to the supplier to go towards the ongoing cost of running an 084 number, which includes the cost of renting the equipment from the supplier.

8. The NHS Direct telephone advice service currently operates on 0845 4647. However, the Department (with OfCom) are currently consulting on options for the introduction of a new three-digit telephone number to help people find the right local service to meet their urgent, unplanned care needs. NHS Direct will retain its current 084 number until we and they are clear about any future role and function they may have in implementing a national 3-digit number for urgent care.

9. For further details contact the Department of Health press office on: 020 7210 5221.

Contacts

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