

19th January 2010

Dear Surgery Line User,

Thank you for your request for confirmation from NEG that the comparative cost of calls to Surgery Line are no more than an equivalent call to a geographic number. I am happy to confirm this is the case and to confirm our understanding and compliance with guidance issued in December 2009 by the Department of Health and January 2010 by the British Medical Association.

Our understanding of the guidance

As the leading provider of enhanced telephony services to NHS Primary Care, we were delighted by the announcement on 14th September 2009, by Health Minister Mike O'Brien MP that GPs and other NHS professionals and organisations will in future remain free to choose 084 number based solutions for local services, so long as the cost of the call is no more than the equivalent cost of calling a geographical number.

We very much welcomed the Government's conclusions at the end of its consultation process on the use of 084 numbers in Primary Care, namely that:

- The Government accepted that 084 numbers are not always significantly more expensive for patients to call;
- The Government recognised that some telecoms providers (e.g. NEG) *"have chosen to charge no more for an 084 call than a call to a geographic number when dialing from a fixed line"*;
- The Government said it wishes to see a marketplace evolve in the NHS in which 084 numbers compete alongside 01, 02 and 03 numbers.

We were also delighted by the release on 21st December 2009 of formal Directions to the NHS instructing them to enable this to happen. As you will know this was accompanied by guidance in the form of a letter to the NHS from Nick Hall, Senior Civil Servant at the Department of Health, stating:

"These Directions do not prohibit an organisation from using specific number ranges for the purpose of contacting NHS services. Organisations remain free to use nongeographical number ranges such as 084, providing that patients are not charged more than the equivalent cost of calling a geographical number to do so."

The Directions from the Secretary of State make clear that any NHS organisation is free to choose to continue with an 084 number. All that is required is for the NHS organisation to satisfy itself that the cost of calls to the NHS body is no higher than equivalent calls to geographical number.

Having held many meetings with the Department of Health over the past year, we understand that the Department of Health would be happy for an NHS body such as yours to get this reassurance in the form of this letter from NEG to you confirming that the cost of calls via the Surgery Line solution is no higher.

You might also find it useful to know that the British Medical Association has confirmed our understanding in guidance to its members, issued on 8th January 2010, which states:

“GP practices (and all others bodies within the NHS using 084 numbers) should obtain written confirmation from their phone service supplier that the charge for a call to their number is no more expensive than making an equivalent local call. The DH has been assured by the main phone service supplier, NEG (Network Europe Group, a national provider of telephony services such as Surgery Line), that this is the case.

*This does not mean that the use of 084 numbers in itself has been banned. As long as the tariff is equivalent to local rates, and the practice obtains a written guarantee from their phone supplier (usually NEG) that they are charging rates in line with local geographic calls, then they will be deemed to have fulfilled their medical services contract” – **“If any legal action should be taken to challenge this, it would be against the Primary Care Trust (PCT) and not the practice.”***

Call cost comparison

During the consultation period, we provided evidence to the Department showing the comparative cost of calls to NEG Surgery Line under your existing contract compared with the OFCOM regulated tariff cost of calling a geographic number.

The Department accepted our evidence, which led to them confirming in their response that: *“Some providers have chosen to charge no more for a 084 call than a call to a geographic number when dialing from a fixed line.”*

You can be confident, therefore, that your decision to continue to deliver excellent services for your patients using NEG Surgery Line has the full support of the Department of Health and the British Medical Association.

We would be happy to answer any questions you may have.

Best regards

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Company Director
Network Europe Group Limited