

# General practitioners and the vital role they play 'holding the risk for the NHS'

As gatekeepers to secondary care, GPs must protect patients and the services to which they refer them

**Andrew Cole**

**A**lthough much has changed beyond recognition in the NHS over the past 70 years, one common strand has been the central role of the general practitioner as gatekeeper for nearly all other healthcare services, both in hospital and primary care.

For most patients, GPs are the face of the NHS. According to NHS England, more than 5 million come through surgery doors each week. Just as importantly, most will return home or simply make a trip to the pharmacy afterwards.

In fact a major part of the GP's role is "holding the risk for the NHS," says Prof Helen Stokes-Lampard, chair of the Royal

College of GPs. So, for instance, a GP may refer one patient for a hip replacement much sooner than another, depending on their need and circumstances. "There is very sophisticated thinking going on when you make these decisions - you are weighing up so many factors."

The gatekeeping role, which is widely admired around the world, actually pre-dates the founding of the NHS. But once the service

became universal, everyone was expected to register with their family doctor. The resulting patient list is one of the foundation stones of the NHS system, says Dr Richard Vautrey, chair of the GPs' committee at the British Medical Association.

It means GPs can build up a relationship with the patient over many visits and possibly over many generations. "This enables continuity of care and holistic, family medicine," Vautrey observes.

It also protects patients from unnecessary hospital visits and treatments. "We can help to interpret information and work

in partnership with the patient to find the best course of action for a particular problem. Direct access to services can lead to the wrong treatment in the wrong place, as well as increased costs."

Current pressures on the NHS, and on GPs in particular, are clearly placing this approach under strain. The rapid increase

in A&E attendances over recent years, for instance, reflects in part the growing problems in getting a GP appointment. At the same time, initiatives such as referral management centres are seeking to ration the number of referrals to

secondary care.

But for Vautrey, the biggest threat to the gatekeeping role could be online services. "The registered list depends on the fact that the majority don't use the practice very often while a small number use it quite often," he says. "If you shift the balance and practices lose those 'balancing' patients, then you end up with an unstable system. There is a danger that something very precious will be lost."





▼ GPs in England see more than 5 million patients a week

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