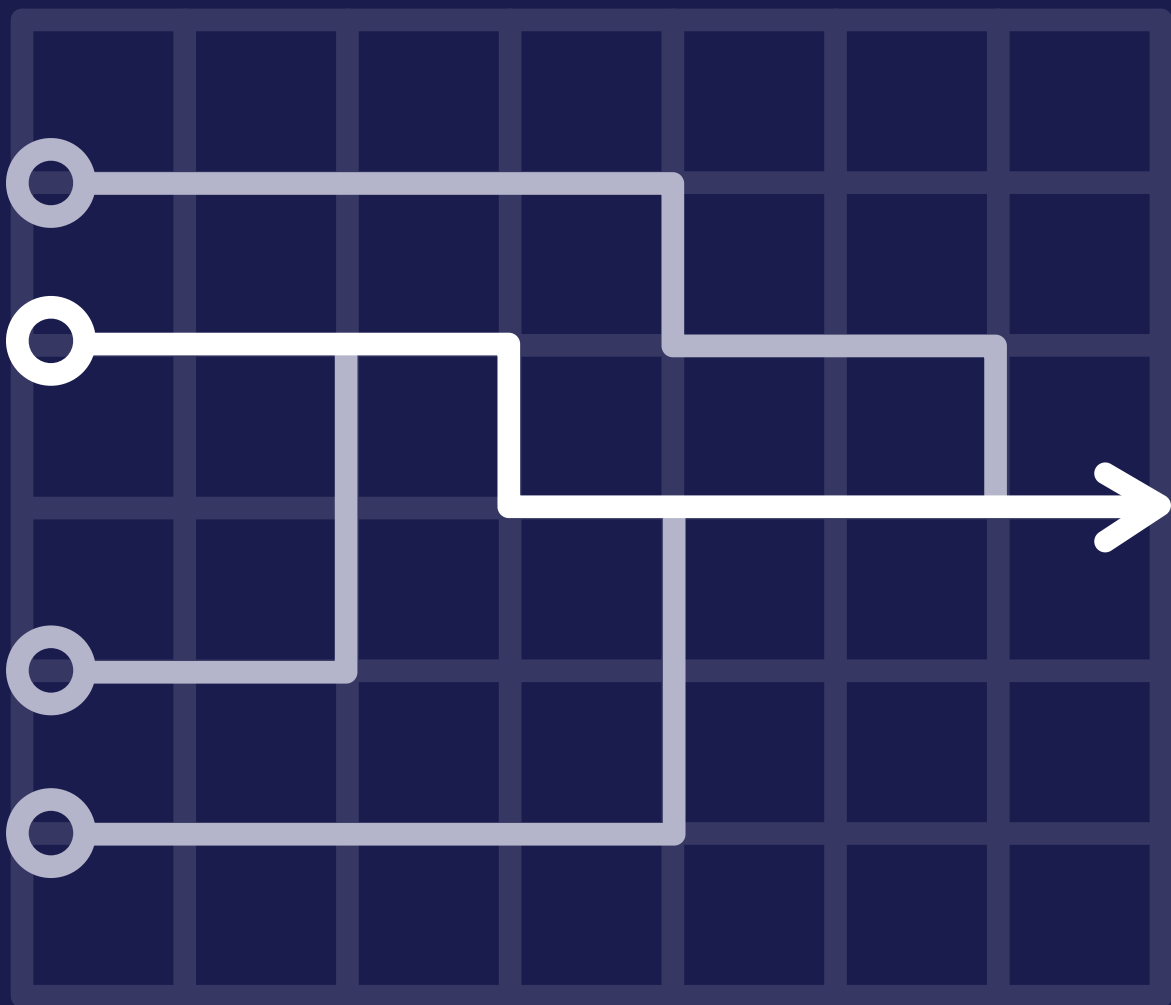


Setting the GP record straight

# Better access to primary care



accuRx

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## ● ● Foreword

GPs and their teams have faced extremely challenging times during the pandemic. As well as continuing to support their patients, they've played a significant role in the national COVID-19 vaccination programme and delivered more flu jabs than ever before.

The NHS is currently experiencing some of the most severe pressures in its 70 year history, which have been amplified by the pandemic. Having spent time shadowing healthcare staff at practices, we've seen first hand the impact it's having on them. With the number of doctors, nurses and other practice staff falling, the population rising and a backlog caused by the pandemic, demands on GPs and their teams are higher than ever.

Yet, despite there being fewer GPs per patient, GP practices have actually seen more patients than ever before.

### **There's been a 30% increase in the number of appointments since 2019:**

- 31.1 million appointments took place in June 2021 alone
- 4.2 million of these were life-saving COVID-19 vaccinations

And, on average 46% of GP appointments take place on the day they were booked, suggesting patients are mostly able to get an appointment when they have an urgent need.

With demand at an all time high and morale at an all time low, we need to recognise the importance of primary care and support GPs and their teams. The current system is not sustainable; we need to focus on improving staff wellbeing, increasing the number of GPs and redefining valuable primary care — all of which will ultimately improve patient outcomes.

Throughout this short report, we'll highlight the issues that general practices face and discuss how they're responding. We'll also share the data that suggests that reverting back to the old model of 10 minute face to face appointments isn't always the best solution for patient care.

We hope that you'll find this report insightful and will continue to support GPs during these difficult times, as they work hard to improve access to primary care for all patients.



**Jacob Haddad,**  
CEO and co-founder of accuRx

## ● ● A GP's perspective



We are aware that demand is higher and that patients may have to wait longer to see a GP as a result. We know just how important it is that patients are cared for in a timely manner and we've introduced various methods to enable better access for patients, including online consultations, triaging patients and enabling remote access for GPs to increase the number of available doctors that can consult at any one time.

We feel proud of the work we've done to adapt to the pandemic and transition to online consultations. Our trainees have been phenomenal at adapting to the new way of consulting and we're able to support more patients this way, running same day consultations for patients needing more urgent care, and appointments for the vast majority within 48 hours.

**Dr Osman Bhatti, GP in London**

## Understanding the situation in general practice

General practice, and the doctors, nurses and administrative staff who operate it, are experiencing mounting pressures to do more with less.

During an unprecedented pandemic, and with fewer GPs to care for a growing population, they've adapted quickly and cared for more patients than ever before. These are the teams who have delivered a huge number of COVID-19 vaccinations, continued working throughout the pandemic and saw patients face to face when needed during lockdowns.

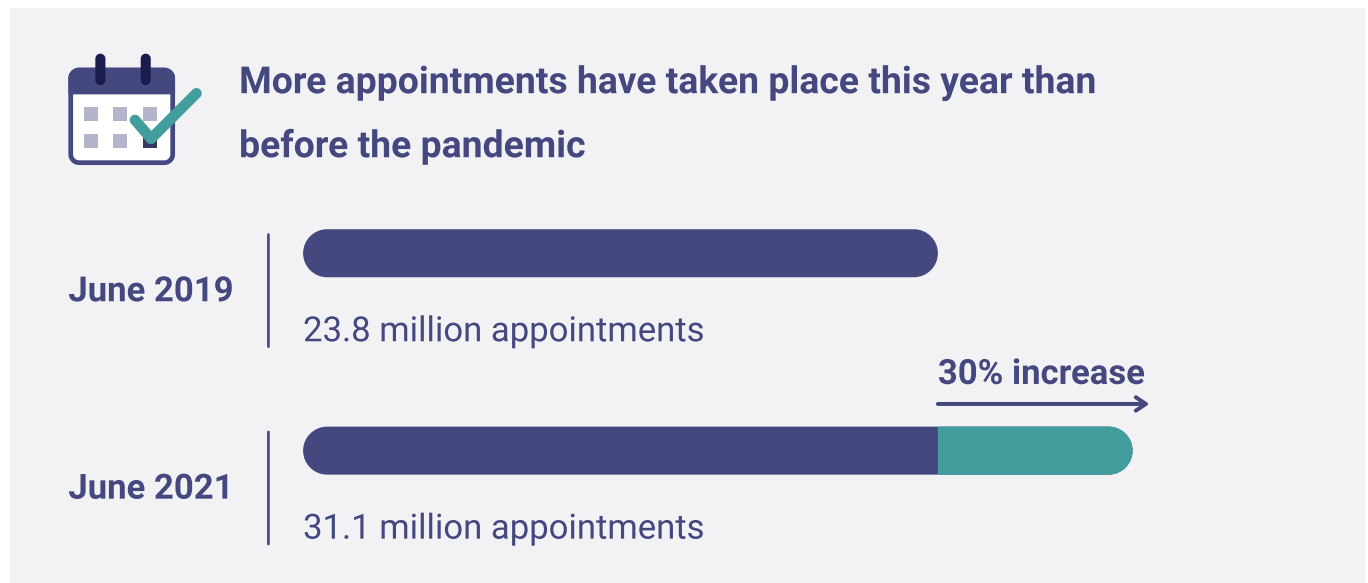
Here, we dig into the challenges facing general practice and how practices across the country have responded:

### 1 Practices face ever greater pressure

Over recent years, trends in training, population growth, and a number of GPs leaving the profession, have meant that there are fewer GPs to care for each patient. The ratio between the number of GPs and patients they serve has been falling for a decade, with just over 1,900 patients per GP in 2015 to just over 2,200 patients per GP today [1].



Despite there being fewer GPs, **practices are now seeing more patients than before** the pandemic. In June 2021 alone, 31.1 million appointments took place, including 4.2 million life-saving COVID-19 vaccinations. In June 2019, practices ran 23.8 million appointments [2]. That's a 30% increase in the June appointment rate between comparable years [3].



Source: NHS Digital

As a result of the pandemic and the major pressures the system faced treating COVID-19 patients, many more patients are now waiting for appointments and treatment in secondary care. The backlog was estimated to have reached 5.3m appointments by May 2021 [4]. This impacts primary care, because patients who would otherwise progress through the pathway for their condition are waiting for treatment and seek help from their practice in the meantime.

Sadly, 74% of practices said they experienced an increased level of patient abuse since before the pandemic [5]. It's not surprising that those working in general practice are feeling overwhelmed and under appreciated.

## 2 Innovation has enabled practices to free up appointment time for other patients

The NHS Long Term plan set out an ambition to offer digital-first primary care to most people by 2023/24. Despite many practices not having the tools to do this before 2020, we saw innovation and adoption at pace during the pandemic.

General practices are now using technology to communicate with patients in ways they couldn't before, adopting asynchronous messaging, video consultations, and online consultation (an online form to request help from a practice).

**Data from accuRx users and national statistics show how quickly this method of communication has become vital to healthcare in this country:**

- Over 2 million messages are sent from practices to patients every week saving significant admin time [6] - that's an average of 70 messages a day going out from each practice. These messages include:
  - Following up with patients about problems discussed with a GP or sharing critical advice about a condition
  - Letting them know test results are fine

Before the pandemic, much of this communication was done via telephone or letter, taking up a lot of administrative time. Messaging can enable better access to healthcare and a more personalised approach.



**2.25 million messages are sent from practices to patients every week.**

Source: accuRx data



- Practices with capability for video consultation increased usage from 3% to 99% within a few weeks of the first lockdown in March 2020 [7] - something the NHS Long Term plan envisaged taking 5 years. One practice with a 12,000 patient list reduced their appointment DNA rate from about 80 per month to 10 per month after they implemented video consultations [8]. Use of video has, however, significantly reduced, but many GPs rely on messaging patients to effectively communicate with them.
- Practices also send around **500,000 patient surveys** or response requests each week via our Florey (surveys) and Patient Response features. This asynchronous communication is two-way, with patients sending updates or photos of a condition. We rolled this out across primary care quickly and we've been amazed by all the creative ways GPs are using it, many of which we couldn't have predicted. Getting this information back from patients means GPs can better personalise their care and often avoid appointments for administrative purposes.

The bottom line is clear. For many, **this kind of innovation has saved healthcare staff time and improved access to care.**



**In August 2021, 46% of appointments with GP practices took place on the same day.**

Source: NHS Digital

- The proportion of patients getting appointments on the same day they're booked is relatively stable:
  - 46% of appointments with England's GP practices took place on the same day they were booked in August 2021 [9], up less than 3% (from 42.3%) during the same month in 2019.
- Patients report waiting less time than before:
  - The longest waits have fallen significantly - only 16% of patients report waiting a week or more for an appointment, compared to 25% in 2019 [10].



### The number of patients waiting more than a week for an appointment has dropped



Source: GPPS National Report

### 3 Patients still report their needs are being met

Recent publicity about the healthcare crisis has only perpetuated a dangerous message that telephone or video appointments are inferior to in-person interactions. Many patients are satisfied with remote consultations, while most prefer a mix of face to face, phone calls and messaging, depending on the immediate need and what's most convenient to them.

**Face to face appointments will always be an essential part of general practice, but good and safe care can also be delivered remotely.**



**Over 92% of patients who had a remote consultation said their needs were met.**

*Source: GPPS National Survey*

In fact, the evidence suggests that **most patients are satisfied with these methods of communicating with practices**. The GP Patient Survey found 92% of patients who had a remote appointment reported their needs were met; only slightly lower than the 95% who were seen face to face [10].

While keeping high standards, practices have been able to save time and become more efficient. In our annual survey of accuRx users, practices estimated that they were able to free up the time of up to 15 appointments for other patients or purposes each week. And staff members were estimated to be saving around 2-3 hours of admin per week.

Patients and practice staff should have the choice to decide the most appropriate route of care together.



**Staff members using tech to communicate with patients are saving 2-3 hours of admin a week.**

*Source: accuRx data*



The use of SMS messaging has made a huge difference to accessibility for our patients. One of our patients suffers from dysphasia after having a stroke. When I called him for a consultation, I couldn't figure out what was wrong as he struggles with verbal communication.

I was able to text him, and he responded saying he needed a doctor visit: 'doctor please, to come through the back door.' While I was there, he was able to communicate with me by typing on his phone and felt reassured that he could get the care he needed. Simple technology in healthcare makes a huge difference to our patients and the care we can give them.

**Dr Ahmed Ali, Byron Medical Practice**

## ● ● Access to Personalised Care

We've experienced a massive period of change — living through a pandemic is something most of us thought we'd never experience in our lifetimes. We've all had to adapt quickly during this period, and so did those who care for us.

General practice was struggling before the pandemic began. But as a result of lockdowns and social distancing, change was enacted far quicker than any of us could have anticipated. We should reflect on what we've learned over the last 18 months and build on this, rather than revert back to what we knew before.

What we know now is that the situation in general practice is unsustainable. Action is needed on two fronts: increasing the number of people who work in it and improving the technology the whole system has access to.

We need to act quickly to:

- Make healthcare teams' lives easier
- Better connect everyone involved in a patient's care
- Free up more time for face to face appointments for those who need them

Instead of focusing on turning the clocks back and trying to run a one-size-fits-all model of 10 minute face to face appointments for every need, we should seek to redefine valuable contact in primary care.

**This means empowering patients and practice staff to choose what method of care is most appropriate.** Only then can we make sure that everyone has access to personalised care.

## ● ● Appendix

*[1] BMA October 2021, Pressures in General Practice: GP to patient ratio*

*[2] NHS Digital, 2019, Appointments in General Practice*

*[3] Note: June 2020 is less comparable because it was part of the Covid mid -first wave pandemic*

*[4] BBC News, July 2021, Covid: NHS backlog in England could reach 13 million, says Sajid Javid*

*[5] Pulse survey, September 2021*

*[6] accuRx public dashboard and user survey, 2021*

*[7] NHS X, 2020, The use of online and video consultations during the COVID-19 pandemic - delivering the best care to patients*

*[8] accuRx Case Study*

*[9] NHS Digital, 2021, Appointments in General Practice*

*[10] GP Patient Survey (GPPS) National Report, January - March 2021*

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