

PRESS RELEASE

11 January 2017

Health bosses in Wiltshire have issued a stark warning to members of the public who are misusing emergency NHS services, putting unnecessary pressure on hospitals and putting more seriously ill patients at risk.

Between 31 December and 8 January 2017, just over 5,000 people attended A&E departments at Royal United Hospital, Bath, Great Western Hospital in Swindon and Salisbury District Hospital, yet only 33% of those people actually needed urgent or emergency treatment.

Over the last month, people have attended A&E departments with minor ailments which are not serious or life-threatening, including examples such as:

- Coughs, colds and sore throats
- Toothache
- Sickness and diarrhoea
- Excessive alcohol consumption
- Backache
- Broken finger nails

Speaking on behalf of NHS Wiltshire CCG, Tracey Cox, Acting Accountable Officer said: “Emergency departments right across the region are extremely busy and people must start taking accountability for their actions and the impact this has on the NHS.

“Our message is very simple: if it is not a serious or life threatening emergency then please do not waste the time of busy hospital teams or 999 services who are there to look after patients who are very sick and who do need immediate medical help.

“Many of the attendances the region’s hospitals are seeing are for common winter illnesses such as bad colds, viruses or stomach bugs which always circulate in the community at this time of year. These are best looked after at home with over the counter medication, plenty of fluids, rest and recuperation - they certainly do not need a trip to A&E.”

The NHS always sees a rise in emergency admissions to hospital at this time of year, particularly amongst older people, who are much more susceptible to serious illness or injury during the cold winter months. For every inappropriate A&E attendance the attention of hospital staff is pulled away from caring for those who really do need immediate and potentially lifesaving help.

Mrs Cox added:

“Our emergency system is without doubt the best in the world but we need to keep it that way and keep 999 and emergency care free to do what the NHS does best. The system is under extraordinary pressure, so we are appealing to the public today and for everyone to really think about how to use services. All our staff are working really hard to get back on track, but people can help us to ease the pressures by, for example, offering friends and family members a lift to and from appointments, and supporting their loved ones at home with extra care and attention to ensure they can be discharged from hospital when medically fit. This will help hospitals to free up beds so that the NHS is able to admit and treat the most vulnerable people who need our care the most”.

She added: “We appreciate that, regrettably, some patients are having elective operations and appointments cancelled during this period of sustained escalation. We completely understand that this is likely to cause additional inconvenience and distress but patients should be assured they will have their operation or appointment rebooked as soon as possible, and will be contacted directly”.

Dr Peter Jenkins, GP and Chair of NHS Wiltshire Clinical Commissioning Group said:

“Your GP should always be the first port of call for most medical problems unless it is a serious or life threatening emergency. If in doubt, the free NHS 111 number is available 24/7 for medical advice.

“If you have made a GP appointment which you don’t need any more, we urge you to cancel. If you don’t, you prevent other patients from being seen and waste the time of ever-stretched doctors and nurses. In Wiltshire, this boils down to a potential 6,000 patients missing out on an opportunity to be seen each month. So please make sure you let your practice know if you can’t attend - practices will then be able to offer these appointments to other patients who need them”.

Dr Jenkins added: “The number of missed appointments across Wiltshire averages around 6,000 every month, a shocking statistic especially at a time when practices are struggling to meet patient demand for appointments. It’s really important that people understand the impact they have if they simply do not turn up. Everyone has responsibility to look after the NHS – it’s patients’ money after all – and we urge Wiltshire people to cancel their unwanted appointments so that those most in need are able to be seen more quickly”.

Healthcare leaders in B&NES, Swindon and Wiltshire are also backing the national Stay Well This Winter campaign which encourages people to look after themselves well www.nhs.uk/staywell.