

A quick guide to GPs taking on out-of-area patients

Dr Richard Vautrey looks at the key issues for practices registering under the GP Patient Choice scheme

From this month, GPs have the opportunity to register patients who live outside their boundaries without being obliged to offer them home visits.

The initiative is known as the *GP Choice scheme*, and it may seem attractive at first, as each patient will bring the full capitation fee when they register.

But the GPC has warned that GPs have not had time to prepare for the scheme, and there are also concerns among GPs that uncertainty about who will provide home visits and urgent care for patients who register away from home may make the scheme unsafe.

Patients registered under the scheme will not be eligible for home visits from the out-of-area practice they register with, so local area teams must arrange for this to be done by GPs local to patients' homes. NHS England is to introduce a new national enhanced service that will pay GPs to do home visits. [see below]

It had been thought the scheme would appeal to people wanting to register at a practice near work, but a third of the practices in the pilot failed to attract any patients. NHS England admitted that it expects only 0.4% of the population to join the scheme when it is rolled out from this month.

What out-of-area patients can we take on? Can we pick and choose?

Practices taking on patients must do so in a non-discriminatory way. They cannot cherry-pick patients who appear relatively well. However, practices are allowed to refuse to register patients when they believe they have care needs that would be better met through registration with a practice near to where they live. These might be patients who are receiving a package of home or community-based support that would be difficult for the practice to co-ordinate remotely or where there are child or adult safeguarding concerns. The practice will have to clearly explain to the patient why they are not able to register them.

If a practice accepts an out-of-area patient it must make clear what the terms of the registration are, and how patients can find out how to obtain urgent care if they are unable to travel to the practice by contacting NHS 111. Patients should also be warned that if their health circumstances change, making out-of-area registration clinically inappropriate in the future, they could be removed from the list (although regulations to make this possible were not in place at the time of writing).

Should we undertake any extra steps when registering a patient from outside our practice area, such as making a note on their records?

Practices should keep a list of which patients are registered with an out-of-area status, and make it clear on their records too. This will help them to give these patients clear information about the risks and limits of registering under this scheme and will also help the practice respond appropriately to requests from these patients in the future, and monitor whether it continues to be clinically appropriate to continue with this arrangement.

How should we inform patients about the consequences and limits of being registered as an out-of-area patient?

There is a model letter at Annex D in the guidance (available at pulsetoday.co.uk/access). Patients are advised to contact NHS 111 if they need urgent care and are unable to travel, or if the practice cannot deal with their problem over the phone.

How much funding will we get under the scheme?

According to the guidance released on 11 November 2014, NHS England intends to pay practices the same global sum (GMS) or baseline (PMS) funding, as well as any other payments (such as QOF or enhanced services income) for out-of-area-registered patients as they would for a local registered patient.

But this may change in the future. NHS England has said it may reduce the capitation fee for patients if, after six months of the scheme, data show urgent care costs need to be offset. However, it will discuss such changes with the GPC.

What steps should we take if we want to refuse out-of-area patients?

There is no obligation for practices to register out-of-area patients, or offer to provide home visits to local patients registered out of the area. Practices can already register patients living outside the area and offer them the full range of GMS, including home visits when necessary. They do not need to participate in the new scheme to do this.

But if you do decide to participate, make it clear via your patient leaflet, website or other information areas whether you are accepting out-of-area registrations or not.

If local patients move away can they automatically become an out-of-area patient?

No. You can keep the patient (but still do home visits), deregister the patient (because they have moved outside the boundary), or re-register them as an out-of-area patient. GPs can only refuse continued or new registration on clinical grounds (for example, if the patient is too far away to be cared for safely).

Can students register as out-of-area patients?

No. Students should be registered in the current way and if they need care when they return home they should then be seen as temporary residents. The GP Choice scheme is not designed to be a dual registration system and it would not be appropriate for students to register near their place of study and at home.

Can we refuse to let our own patients register at another practice?

No. Practices cannot prevent their patients registering with another practice. It is for patients to decide who they register with and whether they want to register as an out-of-area patient or not.

Do we have to provide a home visit if they we know that an out-of-area patient does not have access to a home visiting service?

No. The local area team or CCG has a responsibility to commission a home visiting service. If local practices do not want to take up the DES, the area team or CCG can invite another practice to do it or seek an alternative provider.

If GPs are worried a patient may not yet be covered by a local home visiting service, they should refuse to register them on the grounds that it would not be clinically appropriate. GPs are not obliged to check whether a patient is covered but this can be done by calling NHS 111.

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