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Fears over cuts to opening hours at medical centres

By Sam Hall
Reporter

PLANS to slash the opening hours of two medical centres in Powys have been revealed - sparking concern within the community.

Talgarth Medical Centre and Hay-on-Wye Medical Centre - known as Haygarth Doctors - will be reducing its hours from October 1 as it tries to save money.

It's proposed that Talgarth will close at 1pm on Mondays, Thursdays and Fridays instead of its current 6pm closing time.

It will carry on opening at 8am on weekdays and will close at 6pm on Tuesdays and Wednesdays.

Talgarth's prescription collection hatch will be open from 8am until 5pm on Monday, Thursday and Friday and 8am until 6pm on Tuesday and Wednesday.

And it has been mooted that Hay-on-Wye will shut at 1pm on Tuesdays and Wednesdays instead of 6.30pm.

Hay-on-Wye will keep opening at 8.30am on weekdays and will shut its doors at 6.30pm on Mondays, Thursdays and Fridays.

The medical centre's prescription

collection hatch will be open from 8.30am until 6.30pm on Mondays, Thursdays and Fridays and 5pm on Tuesday and Wednesday.

In a letter, seen by the Brecon and Radnor Express, Haygarth Doctors say the move to cut back its opening hours will mean its Total Nurse Triage scheme will be able to continue.

The triage service sees patients receive remote support via telephone which means the patient is able to see the most appropriate clinician within a suitable timescale.

The letter explained: "The results have demonstrated improved access for GP appointments (for example the wait for a routine GP appointment reduced from over two weeks to an average of 3-4 days), an increase in appointment duration so that GPs are able to spend more time with patients of whom an increasing number have very complex needs."

But, according to the letter, Haygarth Doctors received a three-month notice from Powys Teaching Health Board that it was pulling the plug on funding for the triage service from October 1.

• Story continued on page two



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Cutting back opening hours will save award-winning triage service, medical chiefs insist

• Story continued from page one

THE letter explained: "Unfortunately, Haygarth Doctors has received a three month notice from Powys THB that the funding for Total Nurse Triage will cease on 1st October 2020 and have been advised to make choices regarding service provision should we wish the pilot to continue.

"As clinicians, we believe that the clinical outcomes of Total Nurse Triage have improved the quality of care we are able to provide to our patients.

"In fact the Royal College of General Practitioners awarded the project a 'Bright Ideas Award' which are given in recognition of innovative approaches that have been tried and tested on the frontline."

It added: "As partners, we therefore feel that we have no other choice but to reduce the overall opening hours of Hay and Talgarth Medical Centres to generate cost savings and enable us to continue to deliver the quality care that our patients deserve.

"These decisions have not been taken lightly.

"However, we fully believe that it is in the best interests of our patients that the total nurse triage system needs to continue, particularly in light of the current Global COVID-19 pandemic."

A spokesman for Haygarth Doctors was unavailable to speak to the Brecon and Radnor Express about the proposals in more detail.

Jamie Marchant, Director of

Primary Care, Community and Mental Health Services with Powys Teaching Health Board said: "Haygarth Doctors was successful in applying to Welsh Government for two years fixed term funding from the Welsh Government Primary Care Pacesetter programme for them to evaluate a Total Triage model.

"This two year fixed term from Welsh Government came to an end in March 2020, and as part of the response to COVID-19 Powys Teaching Health Board provided further temporary funding for six months until September 2020.

"Now that this funding has, as planned, come to end we understand that Haygarth Doctors are considering changes to their services.

"We have requested further information from them regarding these proposals and the rationale for change."

A spokesperson for Talgarth Town Council said: "Talgarth Town Council was recently informed by the Haygarth GP Practice that, with effect from October 1 2020, they intend to reduce surgery hours by 30% at the Talgarth site and 22% at Hay on Wye as a cost cutting measure.

"As a council we are strongly opposed to the proposal, as it will have a huge impact both clinically, and in terms of wellbeing, upon all members of our community, but especially on the increasingly elderly population and on the socio economically disadvantaged.

"We would also contend that the Haygarth proposal falls well short of 'good practice' on their part in terms

of quality, duty of care and patient engagement.

"We have voiced our opposition to the proposals to Powys Community Health Council (CHC) the statutory watchdog.

"Carol Shillabeer, CEO, Powys Teaching Health Board, Jamie Marchant, Director of Primary and Community Care, Powys Teaching Health Board, Kirsty Williams, MS, Health Board, Kirsty Williams, MS, Fay Jones, MP and Jesse Norman, MP have also been alerted to our concerns.

"A virtual meeting was held between practice representatives and local councillors, covering part of the practice catchment area, but it is our view that the responses to the questions posed were inadequate.

"It is also felt that consultation on this matter needs to be opened to the wider public and Powys Teaching Health Board needs to engage in open and frank dialogue with the public."

Powys County Councillor William Powell, who represents Talgarth, said: "I am at one with my town council colleagues in having grave concerns about the Haygarth proposals.

"I have great respect for those in General Practice - and my own recent experience of Covid-19 underscores the importance of accessible primary care.

"Whilst understanding the financial pressures on all practices, including Haygarth, I find the proposals to cut access time - in the case of Talgarth, by almost a third - totally indefensible."

The Welsh Liberal Democrat added: "Aside from the obvious

clinical issues, we also need to be aware of the impact on many residents with difficult personal circumstances and low or fixed incomes. Add to that the increase in unemployment in our immediate area by a shocking 36% since March.

"Many people will be entirely dependent on public transport to access appointments under this new régime - and the additional vehicle journeys, for those with access to a car, will have a detrimental effect on the environment.

"With Government ambitions to increase the roll out of flu vaccination in the autumn, combined with the danger of a second spike in Covid-19 and a very real climate crisis, we have a perfect storm.

"I therefore join my town council colleagues in urging the CHC to scrutinise these proposals - and refer them back to the Haygarth practice as fundamentally flawed."

Mayor of Hay-on-Wye, Trudy Stedman said: "Although I was disappointed to see the decreased opening hours for the Haygarth Surgery once the reasons were explained it became obvious that this was in effect their only option.

"The Triage service that they wish to protect is working well, evidenced by the fact that there was no fall in referrals for illnesses other than Covid 19 over the past four months.

"The Local Health Board and Welsh Government funding mechanisms are to blame for this and we should along with our communities be lobbying them on behalf of Haygarth Surgery."

Police vow to clampdown on reckless