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Fears for the future of our GP practices

Some have more than 3,000 patients to just one doctor

Andrew Hirst
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Fresh fears were raised last night over the future of GP services in Suffolk as an investigation revealed some of the county's most stretched surgeries had more than 3,000 patients to one doctor.

The EADT probe also discovered that a job advertisement for £1,000-a-

day locum GPs failed to attract a single applicant.

Billy McKee, a GP at Walton Surgery in Felixstowe, said the service is only surviving because of the "goodwill" of doctors and staff, warning that a "completely different" approach was needed to rescue primary care from the brink.

■ Full story: Pages 4&5



Short story brings home a Bafta Page 3

Junction is a 'litter hotspot'

The Copdock Interchange, on the outskirts of Ipswich, has been named as one of the UK's "dirty dozen" litter hotspots.

The junction was listed as a "grotspot" by members of the public.

It forms part of a national list being compiled by officials from the Clean for the Queen initiative.

■ Full story: Page 2

Lucy's 700km race challenge

A former Suffolk schoolgirl has set off on a 700km challenge across land and water.

Lucy Shepherd, who attended Thomas Mills High School in Framlingham, is captaining a team in the Patagonian Expedition Race.

■ Full story: Page 7

Grades success at town school

Officials at Woodbridge School are celebrating six "excellent grades" in an Independent Schools Inspectorate report. Pupils in all sections of the school "achieve exceptional standards", the report said.

■ Full story: Page 16



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New low in GP crisis as £1,000-a-day

the
investigations
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Andrew Hirst

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Patients in parts of the region worst affected by GP shortages face the “very real possibility” of not being able to access services locally, a doctor has warned.

Our investigation into the challenges faced by general practice in Suffolk and north Essex has revealed a postcode lottery in access to health care, including surgeries where the number of patients for every full-time doctor is more than twice the national average.

At one point, according to figures from the Health and Social Care Information Centre, Caradoc surgery in Frinton had just one doctor looking after more than 7,000 patients, though it has since been taken over by new management and appointed 3.5 full time equivalent GPs. Surgeries in Ipswich, Felixstowe, Framlingham, Clacton, Colchester and Lowestoft have all had patient to doctor ratios higher than 2,500 to one since September 2014.

NHS England claims to be working with local organisation to address the staffing shortages, while Suffolk's GP Federation has put together a plan to attract newly-qualified medics to the region. However doctors in some of the worst-affected towns say a more serious overhaul is required.

Simon Sherwood, a GP at East Lynne Medical Centre in Clacton, said it was now “impossible” to recruit doctors to his practice, claiming that even locum posts advertised at £1,000 a day had failed to attract applicants.

Highest GP:Patient ratios

ENGLAND: GP:Patient ratio – 1:1,517

West Suffolk CCG



GP:Patient ratio
1:1573

Patient numbers
1.2%

Gt Yarmouth & Waveney CCG



GP:Patient ratio
1:1667

Patient numbers
0.8%

North East Essex CCG



GP:Patient ratio
1:1855

Patient numbers
2.1%

Ipswich & East Suffolk CCG



GP:Patient ratio
1:1753

Patient numbers
3.1%

Source: Health and Social Care Information Centre and NHS Choices

He warned the difficulties in recruitment meant there was a “very real possibility” primary care in the town could be completely wiped out within six months, meaning patients would be unable to see a doctor locally. “Clacton is facing a massive systemic failure in primary care,” he said.

“I don't think people quite realise

“We've decreased the number of experienced doctors who are providing the service and those who are left are trying to compensate by working longer hours. But the amount of compensation that they can provide is getting less over time

Billy McKee, left, a member of the Ipswich and East Suffolk Clinical Commissioning Group's governing body

how close to the brink we are and I don't think anyone has any plan or idea about what to do.”

Earlier this year we reported that several practices in Clacton had applied to stop admitting new patients because of staffing issues, which Dr Sherwood said were now worse than ever.

The HSCIC figures show that during the past 18 months at least 10 practices in the region – including three in Clacton – have had doctor-patient ratios of 1:3000 or higher, compared to a national average of around 1:1500.

Chaand Nagpaul, chairman of the British Medical Association's GP committee, said the figures from Suffolk and Essex “highlight the reality of the workforce crisis facing general practice”.

General practice throughout the UK is reported to be attracting too few new recruits while many experienced doctors are retiring early.

Less than a quarter of medical trainees said they intended to pursue a career in general practice, according to the Health Education Board, while recent research from the University of Bath said nearly half of all GPs leaving the profession in England between 2009 and 2014 were under 50.

The study compared the situation faced by GPs to “boiling frogs”, in which pressures had slowly built up to a point where many GPs no longer felt they could continue.

Billy McKee, a member of the Ipswich and East Suffolk Clinical Commissioning Group's governing body, and a GP at Walton Surgery in Felixstowe, which has one of the highest patient to doctor ratios in Suffolk,

said the service was only surviving on the “good will of the profession”.

He claims to regularly work 14 hour days, with the managerial pressures of running a surgery accounting for much of the burden.

Dr McKee said many GPs were taking salaried positions rather than working as practice partners to avoid the administrative “bureaucracy” now associated with the job.

“We've decreased the number of experienced doctors who are providing the service and those who are left are trying to compensate by working longer hours,” he said.

“But the amount of compensation that they can provide is getting less over time.

“We've got a much smaller workforce that we are going to have to deploy in a completely different way in order to provide a service that is sustainable.

“That's a big challenge and it's going to require blue sky thinking.”

The recruitment problem has been compounded by growing patient numbers.

In the Ipswich and East Suffolk

CCG region, the number of registered patients increased by 3.1% between September 2014 and November 2015, according to HSCIC figures, while at some practices, such as Barham and Claydon, there was an increase of 25% during that time.

MP for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich, Dan Poulter, who is a qualified doctor, said he had been working with GPs in Claydon to support the creation of a new surgery to meet the increased demand posed by new housing.

Rachel Helliar, practice manager at The Swan Surgery in Bury St Edmunds, which had a ratio of more than 2,000 patients per GP, said the last 12 months had been the busiest in her 19 year career, with increased waiting times for routine appointments.

“It was always busier in winter during the flu season, but while there used to be a let up over the summer that just does not happen any more,” she added.

“There's more demand on services and patient expectations can be unrealistically high.”

Practice	Number of patients	FTE* GP number	GP:Patient ratio
Ipswich and East Suffolk			
1 Barham & Claydon	2,123	0.349	1:6083
2 Deben Road, Ipswich	7,426	2.25	1:3300
3 Hawthorn Drive, Ipswich	8,125	2.667	1:3046
4 Walton, Felixstowe	4,246	1.444	1:2940
5 Framlingham	9,332	3.5	1:2666
West Suffolk			
6 Siam, Sudbury	9,124	3.889	1:2346
7 Oakfield, Newmarket	6,870	3	1:2290
8 Guildhall, Clare	4,996	2.194	1:2277
9 The Swan, Bury St Edmunds	11,630	5.648	1:2059
10 Hardwicke House, Sudbury	22,903	11.305	1:2026
Great Yarmouth and Waveney			
11 Family Health Care Centre, Gt Yarmouth	5,256	1.64	1:3205
12 High Street Surgery, Lowestoft	11,877	4	1:2969
13 Gorleston Medical Practice	7,826	2.75	1:2846
14 Central, Gorleston-on-Sea	12,694	4.89	1:2596
15 Crestview, Lowestoft	15,615	6.64	1:2351
North East Essex			
16 Caradoc, Frinton-on-Sea	7,536	1	1:7536
17 Old Road, Clacton-on-Sea	7,757	2	1:3878
18 The Great Clacton Medical Practice	7,608	2	1:3804
19 East Lynne, Clacton-on-Sea	9,956	3	1:3319
20 The Hawthorn, Colchester	4,918	1.5	1:3279

* Full Time Equivalent



Photos: WARREN PAGE/PAGEPIX LTD & CONTRIBUTED



Left, Dr Dan Poulter, MP for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich, who has been supporting the creation of a new surgery in Claydon. Right, Rachel Helliar, practice manager at The Swan Surgery in Bury St Edmunds



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post fails to attract interest

Patients continuing to receive 'safe and effective health care' despite shortages

Health commissioners in the region say they are working together to address the pressures in general practice.

NHS Ipswich and East Suffolk and NHS West Suffolk CCGs said a growing population and ongoing recruitment issues had placed an increased demand on services. However, a spokesman added that GPs and staff worked hard for their patients, which was reflected in a recent satisfaction survey showing that 88% of people rated their experience as good or better – a higher rating than the national average.

“Although the overall GP: patient ratio in Suffolk is slightly above the national average, patients are continuing to receive safe and effective health care,” the spokesman added.

Sam Hepplewhite, chief officer at the North East Essex CCG, said she was aware of the “significant shortage of GPs in our county, particularly in some of our coastal practices”, which created difficulties in accessing a doctor when needed.

She said a workforce development centre had been launched to promote primary care careers.

“Shortages in the primary care workforce are national problems, but we will do everything possible to improve our local situation,” she added.

Tessa Litherland, director of contract management for the Great Yarmouth and Waveney CCG, said the group had produced and an innovative “strengthening primary care development plan”, which identifies ways to help manage increasing workloads while making sure primary care



■ Sam Hepplewhite.

Photo: CONTRIBUTED

resources are used efficiently.

“One such example is the work we are doing to support practices to work corroboratively and explore how different staff roles can be used to support GPs, such as by developing pharmacist roles in GP practices,” she added.

Christine Macleod, medical director for NHS England (East) said the organisation worked with practices, CCGs and the local medical committees to address the challenges in recruitment in Suffolk and north Essex.

“Nationally NHS England, Health Education England (HEE), the General Practitioners Committee (GPC) and the Royal College of General Practitioners (RCGP) have produced a 10 point plan to building the workforce with measures such as developing other health care professionals to work in primary care, for example clinical pharmacists,” she added. “NHS England and its local partners are committed to implementing this plan in the East.”



■ Christine Macleod, left, medical director for NHS England (East) said the organisation has worked with practices, CCGs and the local medical committees to address the challenges in recruitment.

Photo: SU ANDERSON



IN BRIEF

Witness in fatal A12 toddler crash sought by police

SUFFOLK: A female driver who may have seen a fatal crash on the A12 in Martlesham which claimed the life of a toddler last week has been urged to call police.

A 20-month-old girl died at Addenbrooke's Hospital in Cambridge on Friday afternoon after a two-vehicle collision on the A12 south-bound in Martlesham, between the Tesco and BT roundabouts, at around 1.45pm on Thursday. Police said: “The driver of the large 4x4 – thought to be a woman, described as white, in her 40s to early 50s with blonde hair – is being sought as a potential witness as this vehicle is thought to have been behind the two cars involved in the crash. It is possible the driver may not have initially realised the seriousness of the incident.” To help, call 101.

Fatal road crash victim is named by police

BRANTHAM: Police have named the victim of a fatal road crash in Brantham on Saturday night as George Richard Mortimer.

Mr Mortimer, 87, was walking along the A137 at Brantham Hill, close to his home, when he collided with a Renault Scenic at around 11.20pm. He was taken to Colchester General Hospital, but died the next morning.

His family said: “Affectionately known as Richard, he lived and worked in the Brantham area for much of his life.” Witnesses should call 101.

Skill mix helping surgeries to meet demand

The ratios of doctors to patients at surgeries across Suffolk and north Essex were calculated using figures from the Health and Social Care Information Centre's most recent workforce census report and NHS Choices.

While the ratios give an indication of some of the pressures facing general practice in the region, health professionals have said there are other aspects of care that need to be considered.

Suffolk GP Federation's Simon Rudland said GP teams were “innovating to help meet the demands of their patient populations”, by providing a “skill mix” of nurses and doctors, as well as physiotherapists, pharmacists and mental health workers.

“We want more GPs in Suffolk,” he said.

“We also understand there are other amazing health profession-



■ Dr Simon Rudland of the Suffolk GP Federation.

Photo: SIMON PARKER

als that can work alongside GPs to help our patients.”

The figures also do not include

locum workers, which many practices use to fill temporary or long-term vacancies.

Rachel Helliard, practice manager at The Swan Surgery in Bury St Edmunds, said there was a misconception that locums were costly and meant patients did not get continuity in their care. She said her practice used the same locums on a regular basis so they were familiar to the patients and paid a fixed rate.

With staffing levels fluctuating regularly, some of the practices with particularly high ratios of patients to GPs said they had since appointed additional full time doctors.

Caradoc in Frinton was taken over by Anglian Community Enterprise (ACE) and now claims to have increased its number of full time equivalent GPs from one to 3.5. Hawthorn Drive in Ipswich said it had increased its number of FTE GPs from 2.667 to three.

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A nation where folk struggle to see a GP. Why?

There's irony in our pages today. It centres on a new service. This allows north-east Essex GPs, while seeing a patient, to contact consultants and seek guidance. With luck, some hospital visits will be avoided because of the advice they can get on the phone. It's a welcome NHS modernisation. The irony is that this development comes as we also reveal how difficult it can be to actually see a GP.

It is far from amusing, though. Most of us have personal knowledge about how hard it is to get an appointment, or hear anecdotal evidence from family or friends running along similar lines. We're not wrong.

Access to primary health care is something of a patchy postcode lottery in Suffolk and north Essex, and we can't allow it to continue. How can we, when a doctor speaks of primary care being on the brink in Clacton-on-Sea because of recruitment problems – a town that, with its high ratio of older residents, needs robust services.

The GP even says locum jobs advertised at £1,000 a day have failed to plug gaps. That's the sign of a service in trouble.

A Frinton surgery has had just one GP per 7,000-odd patients. Surgeries elsewhere have seen ratios of more than 1:2,500. Efforts to put things right are taking place, but NHS England needs to take a firmer grip and give us the first-call medical help we need.

Let's talk about it

Even if we do have enough GPs, we still have to go to see them and give them an accurate description of our symptoms. They can't diagnose us through extrasensory perception if we're sitting at home, keeping shtum.

It almost beggars belief that some folk, passing blood in urine, do not go to the doctor. But, as we know all too well, a number of us are embarrassed to go, or scared about what might be discovered, and adopt a head-in-the-sand strategy that can end in tragedy.

Early diagnosis helps fight kidney and bladder cancer. Why wouldn't you maximise your chances of staying alive? Let's all discuss this with family and friends to raise awareness and dilute any sense of fear.

Life on the edge

We take our hat off to everyone who pushes themselves to the limit and helps others in the process, but some truly make your jaw drop.

Ex-Suffolk schoolgirl Lucy Shepherd is one. The polar opposite of a couch potato, she's lived among indigenous people in the rainforest, crossed a plateau in an Arctic winter, and more. Next: captaining a 700km test of endurance across Patagonia that offers adventure and promotes reforestation. Her team will also back a Vietnamese children's charity.

A few days ago she was "downright terrified" by the fear of failure. No chance. Lucy and her team are already winners in our eyes.

Thought for the day

JOHN 15 V 9 & 12: Jesus said, "I have loved you even as the father has loved me. I demand that you love each other as much as I love you."

We need to be able to make a well-informed judgement on EU

Sir, – What a pity that Mr Mitchell (letters, February 12) should waste his column inches in a vitriolic and personal attack on Mr Betts Green (letters, February 6). He could have informed us of the merits of his conviction that the forthcoming "leap into the dark" by staying in the EU is also a risk worth taking by telling us of the tangible benefits for all 500 million European citizens. The choice being offered to the British people requires us to make a well-informed judgement. Yet we see scaremongering and smear tactics being adopted that fail to inform. Like many I was content with the EEC (European Economic Community) but the direction of travel of the evolving EU (European Union) move towards the United States of Europe is not for me.

My best wishes to our prime minister in his endeavours to realign the direction of travel towards a more acceptable destination that respects and encourages the sovereignty of each of our European nation states. I have not been convinced that a Union States of Europe, that seeks a common currency, a common foreign policy, a common armed force and that is economically dominated by Central Europe, will serve the majority of European citizens (concerns not limited to us "little Englanders" as Mr Mitchell implies).

The form of the European constitution differs fundamentally from our British approach. The European Parliament is only a consultation chamber (albeit a massive chamber) that responds to the bureaucratic thinking produced by unelected apparatchiks.

A United States of Europe is succeeding to supremacy as it systematically dismantles the powers of nation states (borders and immigration the current focus). The building up of the status of "provinces" and selected beneficiaries also assists by undermining the powers and relevance of nation states. These selected bodies are rewarded directly with grants and benefits bestowed by the European Commission from our taxes from a budget un-audited for 20 years. The failed push for English Regional Assemblies sought an East Anglia province. More recently the "devolution" debate, still being held behind closed doors, has seen our own Government pushing for combination of Suffolk, Norfolk and Cambridgeshire (which Cambs. have had the sense to reject). If a new "provincial" tier of local government emerges from this devolution debate it will serve the establishment of the United States of Europe and

Car park closure won't help the town



■ Mike Gooch questions the reduced opening hours of the spiral car park outside the New Wolsey Theatre.

Photo: SU ANDERSON

Sir, – You write with great enthusiasm in the EADT (February 13) regarding the return of Sir Trevor Nunn to Ipswich and the staging of A Midsummer Night's Dream at the New Wolsey Theatre. Indeed you write in your opinion column that the theatre should be packed night after night. I wholly agree with your sentiments and visited the theatre website to book tickets,

only to find emblazoned across the screen the fact that Ipswich Borough Council have seen fit to reduce the opening hours of the spiral car park, with said car park now closing at 7pm nightly. Theatre patrons are directed to park in nearby streets or in Portman Road. I note that your publication has recently featured articles concerning the manner in which the town is being

managed and developed, some of the views expressed being such that visitors are not encouraged. I cite the closure of the spiral car park as another such example, where the town appears to be working against rather than with those who seek to encourage visitors. Perhaps some sort of campaign is called for?

MIKE GOOCH,
Debenham.

assist in the dismantlement of our nation state. So what form of Europe will best serve our democratic rights in the future? Certainly trading together and mutually supporting common interests. But not at the expense of each nation losing its sovereignty over their borders and who they choose to welcome, currency, foreign policy, armed forces, justice, working practices (the list goes on). In short a new direction of travel is required that reverses the one-way power transfer to Brussels-based centralisation and control. Only the people of Britain have an opportunity to signal the citizens' view on the Europe that serves the people's interest. Our prime minister is not only negotiating for us but also the hopes of many European citizens

who support sovereignty for their nation state too. They are denied the opportunity to have their voices heard but we have a chance to signal the citizens' direction - either a belief in a United States of Europe overseeing provinces with centralised control, or a belief in European sovereign nations overseeing European collaboration.

DAVID CARD,
Battisford.

Peasants will have their say

Sir, – The EU does not like referenda, the voters tend to get it wrong. At the time of the Nice Treaty which Ireland rejected in a

referendum until they were told to do it again and get the right answer, one Louis Michel, a Belgian foreign minister expressed his concerns. "I personally think", he said, "that it is very dangerous to organise a referendum when you are not sure to win it. If you lose it is a big problem for the EU." Mr Cameron seems to have taken this thought to heart, stifling his Eurosceptic ministers and giving his Europhile supporters full reign to speak. He appears to agree with Edward Heath who actually said: "The British public are too stupid to be involved in governing themselves." By inference we should only be governed by an enlightened elite sitting comfortably in Brussels? However, to the unspoken horror