

Why do GPs sometimes charge fees?

Your questions answered

Isn't the NHS supposed to be free?

The National Health Service provides most health care to patients free of charge but there are exceptions for example prescription charges have existed since 1951 and there are a number of other services for which fees are charged. Sometimes the charge is made to cover some of the cost of treatment, for example, dental fees; in other cases, it is because the service is not covered by the NHS, for example, providing copies of health records or producing medical reports for insurance companies.

Surely the practice is being paid anyway?

GPs are not employees of the NHS and this practice in common with most other GP surgeries is run as a partnership and the organisation has to cover costs in the same way as other partnerships of professionals; these costs include staff pay, building expenses, heating and lighting. The NHS only covers these costs for NHS work but for non-NHS work the fees charged by GPs contribute towards these costs.

What is covered by the NHS and what is not?

The Government's contract with GPs covers medical services to NHS patients, including the provision of ongoing medical treatment. In recent years, however, more and more organisations have been involving doctors in a whole range of non-medical work. Sometimes the only reason that GPs are asked is because they are in a position of trust in the community or because an insurance company or employer wants to ensure that information provided to them is true and accurate.

Examples of non-NHS services for which the Practice can charge their NHS patients are:

- accident/sickness certificates for insurance purposes or for periods of less than 7 days
- school fee and holiday insurance certificates or reports
- reports for health clubs to certify that patients are fit to exercise or have been unable to use the service due to ill-health
- medicals for taxi drivers and HGV drivers
- fitness to fly certificates
- reports for organisations such as BUPA/PPP/WPA
- Subject access requests (Data Protection Act) for copies of medical records

Examples of non-NHS services for which GPs can charge other institutions are:

- life assurance and income protection reports for insurance companies
- reports for the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) in connection with disability living allowance and attendance allowance
- medical reports for local authorities in connection with adoption and fostering

Do GPs have to do non-NHS work for their patients?

With certain very limited exceptions, GPs do not have to carry out non-NHS work on behalf of their patients. Whilst GPs will always attempt to assist their patients with the completion of forms, for example for insurance purposes, they are not required to carry out such non-NHS work.

Why does it sometimes take my GP a long time to complete my form?

Time spent completing forms and preparing reports takes your GP away from the essential medical care of his or her patients. GPs have a very heavy workload and paperwork takes up an increasing amount of their time.

I only need the doctor's signature - what is the problem?

When your doctor signs a certificate or completes a report it is a condition of remaining on the Medical Register that they only sign what they know to be true. In order to complete even the simplest of forms the doctor might have to check the patient's entire medical record. Carelessness or an inaccurate report can have serious consequences for the doctor with the General Medical Council (the doctors' regulatory body) or even the Police.

What will I be charged?

The BMA recommends that GPs tell patients in advance if they will be charged, and what the fee will be. It is up to individual doctors to decide how much they will charge. The Practice has a list of fees for many of the most frequently requested reports on the waiting room wall and on the practice website.

What can I do to help?

- Not all documents need a signature by a doctor, for example passport applications. You can ask another person in a position of trust to sign such documents free of charge.
- If you have several forms requiring completion, present them all at once and ask your GP if he or she is prepared to complete them at the same time to speed up the process.
- Do not expect your GP to process forms overnight: urgent requests may mean that a doctor has to make special arrangements to process the form quickly and this takes them away from their clinical obligations; in many cases urgent requests will be subject to a supplementary fee.