

Workers miss out because they can't get to see doctor

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Chris Smyth Health Editor

Working people get a worse GP service because they cannot get convenient appointments, NHS England claims.

MPs also claim that patients in some areas find it hard to see a doctor because some surgeries close during working hours for no good reason.

The Public Accounts Committee (PAC) criticises family doctors for erratic opening hours at the same time as warning that ministers are pressing ahead with out-of-hours appointments while failing to understand the problem. Taxpayers risk paying too much for evening and weekend appointments because they are 50 per cent more expensive than the out-of-hours services they are duplicating, a report published today claims.

A political row erupted earlier this year when Theresa May ordered GPs to open at evening and weekends, blaming those who did not for fuelling a winter crisis in A&E. She pointed to figures from the National Audit Office showing that almost half of surgeries close between 8.30am and 6pm. One in five close for at least one afternoon a week, rising to three quarters in some areas.

Greater A&E attendances were linked to surgeries with shorter opening hours.

Meg Hillier, chairwoman of the PAC, said that afternoon closing was a "a historical remnant" that had become normalised in some regions. She said: "If you can't see your GP you are more likely to attend A&E and suffer poorer

health outcomes. So we need to have GPs open at the right times."

Three quarters of surgeries that are paid to offer evening and weekend appointments close during the working day. Ms Hillier said: "Staying open during core hours would be a cheaper way of providing more contact time with GPs than providing extended hours."

Rosamond Roughton, of NHS England, told the committee, however, that they were prioritising out-of-hours appointments because people with jobs found it so hard to see a doctor.

"If you are in work and aged between 18 and 50, you will have a worse experience of general practice," she said. "The older you are, the better your experience of general practice is. In terms of convenience of appointments, working-age people find it much harder to get an appointment."

Chaand Nagpaul, chairman of the GP committee on the British Medical Association, said that there was an acute shortage of family doctors.

He said: "In this climate, it is inevitable that despite the continued hard work of NHS staff, there are not enough appointments being delivered to patients."

An NHS England spokesman said: "17 million people now have access to GP appointments at evenings and weekends and the public are clear that they want this across England. Directions have been issued which mean that practices that shut for half-days each week will lose their share of the £88 million enhanced-access scheme."