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Dear Colleague

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Out of Hours (OOH) Primary Care Services: PCTs' Contract and Performance Management Arrangements

You will be aware that the Care Quality Commission (CQC) has been conducting an independent enquiry into Take Care Now's (TCN's) provision of OOH GP services. The enquiry was triggered by the death of a patient in February 2008 treated by a locum doctor who practised in Germany but was employed by TCN through a locum agency to cover some shifts out of hours in East Cambridge and Fenland.

CQC's enquiry is considering a number of issues surrounding this case including an examination of the commissioning arrangements by the primary care trusts (PCTs) that contract with TCN to provide OOH GP services for their patients, and performance management of these – particularly the governance and quality checks in place for monitoring those contracts.

CQC expects to publish its report on the enquiry early in 2010. It has today, however, issued an updateⁱ which includes clear recommendations to those PCTs involved about the need to improve their routine monitoring of OOH GP services. This means more detailed scrutiny of what their providers are delivering against contractual requirements. While the scope of CQC's current enquiry is limited to a specific number of PCTs and a particular provider, the Department strongly supports these recommendations which are relevant to **all commissioners**. PCTs should have robust performance management arrangements in place to ensure their OOH service, like any other commissioned service, is delivering against contractual requirements, and world class commissioning will support PCTs to achieve this.

The TCN experience highlights the particular risks associated with the management of medicines in an OOH service, especially in respect of controlled drugs. Commissioners need to assure themselves that current arrangements are robust and safe. There is a wealth of guidance on the safe and effective management of medicines in an OOH service and this is summarised at the end of this letter.ⁱⁱ

It should be a contractual requirement that OOH providers ensure that the GPs they employ are fit to practice and have been checked properly before being accepted on to their Performers List. Working in an OOH environment poses special challenges, particularly in respect of an appropriate understanding of the way in which services are delivered locally, and effective induction processes for new doctors are an essential precondition for safe practice.

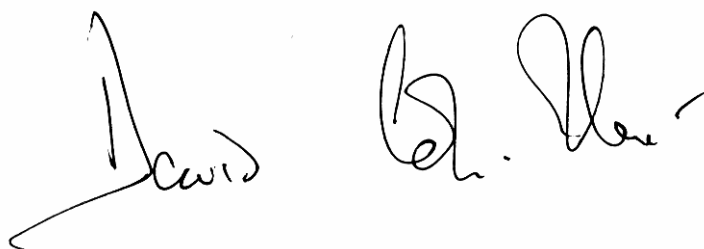
To help PCTs and providers improve quality and productivity of OOHs and reduce local variation, the Department commissioned the Primary Care Foundation to develop and support a benchmarking tool. To date around 90 PCTs have signed up to participate. We have had good feedback on the value of this exercise. I strongly encourage those who have yet to join this benchmarking exercise to do so. You can find out more about the Primary Care Foundation's benchmarking tool at

<http://www.primarycarefoundation.co.uk/page1/page1.html>

The Royal College of GPs, and jointly, the NHS Allianceⁱⁱⁱ and the NHS Confederation^{iv} have issued their own statements in support of CQC's update and reinforcing the messages in it. All have set out practical ways for PCTs to strengthen their local arrangements.

If you have any immediate queries about the contents of this letter, please contact James Adedeji, Deputy Head of Urgent & Emergency Care at james.adedeji@dh.gsi.gov.uk

Yours sincerely



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NATIONAL DIRECTOR FOR PRIMARY CARE

ⁱ The CQC's update can be found at http://www.cqc.org.uk/newsandevents/pressreleases.cfm?cit_id=35381&FAArea1=customWidgets.content_view_1&usecache=false

ⁱⁱ The original OOH medicines guidance that was published at the end of 2004 has detailed guidance about managing doctors' bags in an OOH service and about access to controlled drugs. This is available at: http://www.mmnetwork.nhs.uk/medicines_supply_guidance_a_practical_guide.pdf. More recently, a toolkit was prepared for commissioners and providers to look at access to medicines. It includes further examples of different ways in which local health communities have solved the challenges around out-of-hours access to controlled drugs. This is available at: <http://www.mmnetwork.nhs.uk/Master%20Medicines%20in%20Unplanned%20Medicines%20Toolkit%2026%2011%202008.pdf>. Last year Macmillan Cancer Support published a toolkit for out-of-hours services which identified further examples of excellent practice in this field. This is available via the Learnzone section of the Macmillan website. Access to the Toolkit requires people to register with the Macmillan Learnzone and this can be done at: <http://learnzone.macmillan.org.uk/>

ⁱⁱⁱ http://www.nhsalliance.org/media.asp?display=latest_press_releases

^{iv} <http://www.nhsconfed.org/PRESSRELEASES/2009/Pages/Pressreleases2009.aspx>