

All General Practitioners
All Dental Practitioners
All Pharmacists
All Opticians

26 March 2020

Dear Colleagues

I am conscious that the rapidly developing situation in respect of Coronavirus (Covid-19) requires the full focus of all Family Practitioners and their staff. As such, I am writing to you to provide some immediate direction and clarity on what should happen in this period regarding the handling and management of complaints.

Guidance in Relation to Health and Social Care Complaints Procedure (April 2019) remains the extant guidance relating to the roles and responsibilities of HSC organisations in respect of complaints. Whilst this guidance remains in place, the Department has agreed that it will be necessary to relax certain requirements within the current procedure to allow Practices to focus efforts where they are most needed. Furthermore, the Department has also agreed that should complaints be raised in relation to accessing or impact on services as a direct result of Practices response to the COVID-19 pandemic, **these will not be investigated under the Complaints Procedure.** It will be important that complainants are advised accordingly and promptly should these issues be raised.

While I would ask that complaints continue to be investigated in line with the HSC Complaints Procedure, it is recognised that responses within the required response time (10 working days) will most likely not be met in the current climate. Family Practitioners should make complainants aware of this as soon as possible, either by telephone, written acknowledgement or both. Patience and understanding should be sought and the complainant given assurance that their concerns are being treated seriously will be

investigated and will be responded to as soon as is possible, but should be made aware that given the current extenuating circumstances, there may be a considerable delay in doing so. It is suggested that reference be made to this temporary situation on websites if in situ.

In respect of the reporting of complaints to the Board for monitoring purposes, this should still continue as much as is possible, but we again recognise the position regarding timescales.

I understand this is a particularly challenging time for all HSC staff and it is difficult to anticipate how long these arrangements might remain in place. The Board will, however, continue to work closely with Family Practitioners and keep these arrangements under review on a 4 – 6 weekly basis to allow practitioners to prioritise dealing with Covid-19.

I have enclosed a copy of a recent letter issued by Mr Paul Mc Fadden, Acting Ombudsman.

If you require any further information or clarity on the above, please contact Mrs Liz Fitzpatrick (liz.fitzpatrick@hscni.net) or Mr Michael Cruikshanks (michael.cruikshanks@hscni.net)

Yours sincerely



Valerie Watts
Chief Executive

cc HSCB SMT
Mr B Godfrey, DoH

