HASLAM'S VIEW



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If in doubt 'just check with your GP'

MANY YEARS AGO, I WAS ASKED TO WRITE AN AGONY UNCLE COLUMN ON HEALTH FOR a national magazine.

You know the sort of thing. There would be a letter from a reader, starting 'Dear Doctor, I'm really worried about….,' and a helpful medic would reply.

This seemed just like general practice, where we can be asked questions about absolutely anything countless times every day. I enjoy writing, so I thought it worth a try.

The deal turned out to be straightforward. The Editor made it clear that, to begin with, I was to write the questions as well as the answers. Not only would that guarantee that I would deal with something interesting, but it also meant that I was unlikely to be caught out.

Readers seemed to enjoy it, and once the column was up and running, a few tricky genuine questions started to come in. Unlike real life practice, I could ignore any that left me puzzled.

My personal agony uncle experience has always made me somewhat sceptical about other Q & A columns in magazines, although they can sometimes be a source of rather random knowledge. Nevertheless, there is one phrase that gets used repeatedly, and still really irritates me – the answer that closes with the words, 'if you are in any doubt, just check with your GP.'

These thoughts were triggered by a question asked in a recent magazine about electronic products. The reader had asked: 'My wife has recently been fitted with a pacemaker following a heart operation. However, I wonder whether my wife's new phone can interfere with her pacemaker? Do you have any information?'

The technical response finished with the inevitable sentence: 'The best advice is to talk to your GP or pacemaker clinic.'

'I suppose we should be flattered that GPs are still seen to have the answer to almost anything'

You may well have such knowledge at your fingertips. I certainly don't. The thought of a patient contacting me with a question like this fills me with despair. Although I suppose we should be flattered that GPs are still seen to have the answer to almost anything.

A classic example of this 'check with your GP' advice came back in the summer from none other than the Department of Health.

As updated guidance came into effect for patients on the COVID-19 shielding list, it advised patients who were concerned about their physical or mental wellbeing, or if they were immunocompromised or immunosuppressed and needed more information, to 'contact your GP practice or specialist who can provide you with support and guidance on any further measures you can take to further reduce your risk of infection.'[1]

I am sure that the Department of Health was aware that there were 3.8 million people on the Shielding List in England who had been identified as clinically extremely vulnerable to COVID-19.[2] This equates to around 6.8% of England's population being advised to seek further information from their GP.

If there is clear and simple advice about what immunocompromised people should do, then wouldn't it have been preferable to provide it there and then?

But even this probably pales into insignificance compared with the vast number of diet books and articles that inevitably advise potential dieters to 'check with your GP' before starting any diet. Articles and books that provide exercise programmes tend to do the same.

I'm sure these are well intentioned, though I do sometimes worry that potentially blame and responsibility may be shifted onto doctors if anything happens to go wrong.

REFERENCES
1 www.gov.uk/government/publications/guidance-on-shielding-and-protecting-extremely-vulnerable-persons-from-covid-19
2 https://digital.nhs.uk/dashboards/shielded-patient-list-open-data-set