

# Teach children to 'self treat', say NHS bosses

Call for 'care modules' to be added to curriculums in schools in effort to reduce unnecessary visits to GPs

By Lizzie Roberts **HEALTH REPORTER**

PRIMARY school children should be taught to treat their minor illnesses on their own to stop unnecessary GP visits, NHS leaders have said.

The call is part of a number of recommendations for a national "self care" strategy to ease the burden on the NHS, set out in a new report written by a coalition of health bodies. The authors include NHS Clinical Commissioners – part of the NHS Confederation, the body that represents all parts of the health service – the Royal College of Nursing, the Royal Pharmaceutical Society, and the National Pharmacy Association.

Primary and secondary school curriculums should include "self care modules" to teach children about prevention and well-being, personal hygiene and basic first aid, the report said.

Department of Education guidance on physical health for schoolchildren provides a "starting point", the authors said, but it "fails to focus on self care for self-treatable conditions, or on appropriate use of NHS services".

Children should learn "self care techniques", including how to care for "self-treatable problems", it said.

Lessons could be based on the "Dr Me" model, a health promotion programme for primary-aged children taught by volunteer medical students, the authors said.

The one-hour sessions cover "common self-treatable conditions such as vomiting and diarrhoea; sore throat and fever; and minor head injuries". Children are given six scenarios and asked to decide whether to stay home, visit their GP or attend A&E, the report said.

Results of a study into the project suggests it can "improve children's knowledge of self care and increase their confidence in managing self-treatable conditions".

A "wholesale cultural shift" in attitudes towards self care and accessing health services is needed, according to the report. Self care can play a role in "minimising unnecessary GP appointments and A&E attendances for minor illnesses," it said.

Pharmacies should be more involved in the primary care pathway, the report added, and "digital technology should be used to its fullest potential".

"To meet these ambitions, the rigid patient pathways, unnecessary prescribing habits and persevering perceptions of hierarchies in the NHS must all be done away with," it said. The health bodies' report comes after patients and campaign groups raised concerns about access to GPs and face-to-face appointments. Latest data show 58 per cent of GP appointments were held in person last month, down from around 80 per cent pre-pandemic.

Dennis Reed, the director of Silver Voices, a campaign group for the over-60s, said in some cases self-medication is appropriate if the person is capable of carrying it out, such as taking your own blood pressure reading.

But he said many elderly people have "slunk away" from their family doctor over the past year due to the "stress" of trying to make an appointment.

"It's very depressing that the medical establishment just seems to be pressing on with putting people off from seeing a doctor," he said.

"I know a lot of older people that have just slunk away from practices and they've thought to themselves: 'To hell with it, I can't just go through the stress of trying to get a doctor's appointment.'"

Those patients don't present in time and end up seeking emergency care – "the same thing will happen with self medication", he said.

Neil Lister, president of the PAGB, the consumer healthcare association which is part of the coalition, said: "Self care is not 'no care'. It is an important

but often overlooked part of the primary care pathway."