



Department  
of Health &  
Social Care

From Gillian Keegan  
Minister of State for Care and Mental Health

39 Victoria Street  
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**Alison Mutch**

HM Senior Coroner, Manchester South  
Coroner's Court  
1 Mount Tabor Street  
Stockport  
SK1 3AG

**19 November 2021**

Dear Ms Mutch,

Thank you for your letter of 24 August 2021 to Sajid Javid about the death of Stanislaw Zielinski. I am replying as Minister with responsibility for mental health and am grateful for the additional time in which to do so.

Firstly, I would like to say how saddened I was to read of the circumstances of Mr Zielinski's death, and I offer my sincere condolences to his family and loved ones. The circumstances your report describes are very concerning and I am grateful to you for bringing these matters to my attention.

I would like to acknowledge that general practice teams have worked tirelessly during the COVID-19 pandemic response, remaining open throughout and providing both face-to-face, and remote consultations.

In response to the pandemic, general practice teams rapidly changed how they provided support and delivered services to their populations, with a focus on triage and remote (telephone and online) consultations, so that they can see as many patients as possible, while minimising risk of infection from COVID-19 for patients and staff. This approach was necessary to enable practices to manage demand and prioritise the most urgent cases and helped to navigate patients to the right services or healthcare professional at the right time. The quality of care must remain the same high standard regardless of whether the appointment is in person or remote.

Throughout the pandemic, NHS England and NHS Improvement (NHSEI) provided guidance to general practice and continually updated standard operating procedures to ensure that changing services could operate safely. NHSEI set out clear expectations that general practices offer face to face appointments alongside remote appointments (telephone and online), and that clinical appropriateness and patient preference should be taken into account to determine the most appropriate consultation method. NHSEI has also supported general practices in how best to

communicate with their population on how to access services. Further details on guidance and standard operating procedures can be found on the NHSEI website.

General practices have been providing remote consultations to patients by telephone for many years to help patients access care and clinical advice quickly and conveniently. There are existing skills in the workforce when it comes to telephone consultations and telephone consultations are part of general practice training schemes. NHSEI has worked with professional and regulatory bodies, voluntary, community and social enterprise sector and patient organisations to support the safe and effective use of remote consultations guided by the principle of the interests and preferences of the patient.

A number of resources have been developed<sup>1</sup> to support general practices with good practice principles in maintaining professional vigilance and identifying concerns around safety and safeguarding when using remote consultations. The resources highlight the importance of ensuring patient safety, shared decision making, and patients' needs are paramount.

The Department and NHSEI continue to support general practices, as we emerge from the pandemic, to maintain and improve access to care for patients - on 14 October 2021, the Government and NHSEI published *Our plan for improving access for patients and supporting general practice*<sup>2</sup>. The plan includes investment of £250million in a Winter Access Fund to improve the access to GP practice services.

With regard to the second concern raised within your report, I note that the NHS Long Term Plan will see an additional £2.3billion funding invested in mental health services from 2019/20 – 2023/24, around £1.3billion of which is for the adult community, crisis and acute mental health services to help people get quicker access to the care they need and prevent avoidable deterioration and hospital admission.

My officials understand from NHSEI that Mr Zielinski's referral to local Improving Access to Psychological Therapies, and offer of a first appointment were within the expected national timeframes.

While emerging from the crisis period resulting from Covid-19, the Department continues to monitor the impact of the pandemic and adjust policy and investment priorities where necessary. As part of the Government's commitment to build back better, we have published our Mental Health Recovery Action Plan<sup>3</sup>, backed by an additional £500million for this financial year, to ensure that the right support is in place. The plan aims to respond to the impact of the pandemic on the mental health of the public, specifically targeting groups which have been most affected including those with severe mental illness, young people, and frontline staff.

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<sup>1</sup> See Annex 1

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.england.nhs.uk/coronavirus/publication/our-plan-for-improving-access-for-patients-and-supporting-general-practice/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-mental-health-and-wellbeing-recovery-action-plan>

As part of this investment, we have committed to accelerate key commitments in the NHS Long Term Plan, including:

- £79million to expand support in Children and Young People's Mental Health Services;
- £110million to expand Adult Mental Health Services including Psychological Therapies, implementing the Community mental health framework, investment in Crisis services and maintain the delivery of the 24/7 urgent crisis lines stood up earlier in the pandemic, as well as additional investment in suicide prevention programmes; and
- £111million committed to grow the mental health workforce to deliver these ambitious commitments.

This is in addition to the £2.3billion additional funding a year we are investing in mental health services by 2023/24.

The NHS worked hard to keep mental health services open during the first peak of the COVID-19 pandemic, using technology where needed but also face to face appointments where appropriate. All mental health trusts established 24/7 urgent mental health helplines where people experiencing a mental health crisis can access support and advice.

Talking therapies continue to be made available remotely so people can access help safely from home and the NHS will work to ensure the option of face to face support is provided to people with serious mental health illnesses across all ages where it is clinically safe to do so.

You may also wish to note that in July 2021, NHSEI announced a consultation on the potential to introduce five new waiting time standards, including to community based mental health and crisis services<sup>4</sup>. The consultation closed on 1 September 2021, and NHSEI is analysing the consultation responses which will inform a recommendation to Government in due course on whether and how to implement any proposed new standards.

I hope this response is helpful.



GILLIAN KEEGAN  
Minister of State for Care and Mental Health

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.england.nhs.uk/2021/07/nhs-england-proposes-new-mental-health-access-standards/>

## Annex 1

### Resources to support general practice remote consultations

- [Remote versus face-to-face: which to use and when?](#) (Royal College of General Practitioners)
- [Principles for supporting high quality consultations by video in general practice during COVID-19](#) (Royal College of General Practitioners and NHSEI)
- [How to conduct written online consultations with patients in primary care](#) (British Medical Journal)
- [Key principles for intimate clinical assessments undertaken remotely in response to COVID-19](#) (NHSEI)
- Clinical safety risk templates to support general practice in mitigating risks associated with the implementation of digitally supported triage, online and video consultations
- [Advice on how to establish a remote 'total triage' model in general practice using online consultations and e-resource on remote total triage model in general practice](#) (NHSEI)
- [Supporting practice staff with a Total Digital Triage model for online consultations and Admin Crib Sheet](#)
- [Top 10 tips for COVID-19 telephone consultations](#) (Royal College of General Practitioners)
- [Guidance for general practice on confidential enquiry questions for domestic abuse during a remote consultation](#) (NHSEI and IRISI)