Nearly half of online health providers ‘not safe’: CQC

The Care Quality Commission (CQC) has found nearly 50 per cent of online primary care companies are not safe, but said the sector had still improved dramatically in the past year.

The regulator released its first review of 55 inspections of 35 registered online health providers, each of which has been inspected since November 2016.

Announcing the findings, CQC chief inspector of general practice, Professor Steve Field, stressed that innovation “must never come at the expense of quality.”

The online providers all offered some form of remote GP consultation, either via text or video, and prescribing services, in some cases linked to an online pharmacy.

Many provided private services, while others had contracts with the NHS.

Overall, the report found the majority were providing caring and responsive care. But 43 per cent were deemed “not safe” for patients.

Poor prescribing practices were the biggest area of concern. One online provider prescribed opioid painkillers to a patient for more than two years without telling that individual’s regular GP or accessing the patient’s medical record.

The review found when clinicians were not able to physically assess patients, particularly when using video, they often “lowered the threshold” for prescribing.

This was a significant risk for patients with long term conditions, such as asthma, where overprescribing for a prolonged period could lead to poorer health.

In some instances, non-clinical staff were involved in assessing applications for medicine.

Dementia difficulties with eating and drinking

Brian Lee looks at some of the potential eating and drinking problems that people with dementia can endure

There are many reasons why people with dementia might suffer problems with eating and drinking, these include:

❖ Forgetting to eat
❖ Experiencing difficulties preparing food
❖ Having difficulty recognising food items
❖ Experiencing a change in appetite or taste.

Eating a healthy and balanced diet is important for a person’s physical and mental health. Not eating and drinking enough can increase the risk of dehydration, weight loss, urinary tract infections and constipation. These health problems can be particularly problematic for someone with dementia as they can increase confusion and the risk of delirium, and sometimes make the symptoms worse.

It’s important to consider the person’s likes and dislikes regarding food, however, tastes do change throughout lives. These changes may be more pronounced for someone with dementia. They may find certain colours, textures or smells off-putting or sometimes eat certain foods they previously wouldn’t have.

An increasingly sweet-tooth is common.

Poor appetite and weight loss are quite common as dementia progresses. But there are also medical reasons why a person may have lost interest in food and drink, which your GP or perhaps your dentist could advise on. These include:

❖ Depression, which can lead to poor appetite
❖ Mouth pain and dental problems, which can lead to discomfort and a reluctance to eat or drink
❖ Constipation, which can make a person feel full and nauseous.

❖ Infections or other physical illness.

ENCOURAGING A PERSON WITH DEMENTIA TO EAT

Involve the person by asking them what they would like to eat. If they struggle to decide, you could give them two options of simple things you know they like and can manage. If appropriate, you could involve them in the food preparation.

ENCOURAGING A PERSON WITH DEMENTIA TO DRINK

A person with dementia may not always be able to recognise when they are thirsty, or they might not be able to communicate their thirst. Many foods contain fluid so a reluctance to drink is not always a reason for concern. But, nevertheless, it is recommended to aim for about eight glasses of water, or other liquids, per day.
Ways to reduce your Council Tax burden

Council Tax represents one of the largest monthly outgoings for many retired people, meaning it’s well worth checking you’re not being overcharged. Brian Lee sought the below advice from Age UK.

HOW IS COUNCIL TAX WORKED OUT?

How much Council Tax you pay depends on the ‘band’ assigned to your home based on its value. There are eight council tax bands, ranging from A to H. A is the lowest band, with the lowest charges, and H attracts the highest charges.

You can check your home’s current Council Tax band by visiting www.gov.uk (simply enter ‘council tax’ in the search facility) - and you can challenge your charging band if you think it is wrong.

THERE ARE SOME CIRCUMSTANCES WHERE YOU MAY GET A DISCOUNT ON YOUR COUNCIL TAX:

- If you live alone
  The full Council Tax is calculated assuming there are two or more people living in each home – if you live alone, you should apply to your local council for a discount. The discount is usually 25%, regardless of financial circumstances.

- If you live with someone under 18, a student or carer
  Council Tax isn’t calculated on anyone under 18, full-time students, student nurses and some apprentices or trainees.

- If you’re a carer
  Carers who look after someone in the household for at least 35 hours a week and who meet additional criteria are exempt from Council Tax.

- If there are major changes to your home’s value
  You may be able to get your home moved to a lower Council Tax band if your home has decreased in value. For example, if you’ve made home adaptations for a disabled person, or if a motorway is built nearby. Contact your local office of the Valuation Office Agency (VOA) if you think your home’s Council Tax band should be changed.

- If you change the way you pay
  Although the total year’s amount will stay the same, you can request that your bill be split over 12 months (instead of 10 months) so that each month’s bill is less. Alternatively, if you can afford to pay a year’s worth in one lump sum, check if you can get a discount.

APPLY FOR COUNCIL TAX SUPPORT

You may be eligible to claim Council Tax Support, sometimes called Council Tax Reduction, if you’re on a low income or claiming certain benefits.

- Visit the Council Tax Reduction webpage at www.gov.uk to find out eligibility and how to claim
- Contact your local authority to find out if you’re eligible for any discounts and how you can apply.

COULD I BE EXEMPT FROM PAYING COUNCIL TAX?

You won’t pay Council Tax if:

- You live in a care home or hostel
- Your home is unoccupied and empty (up to 6 months), for example, if you’ve gone into hospital
- You have, or you live with someone who has, a severe mental impairment (e.g. dementia).

Talk to your local authority about your eligibility and how you can apply for an exemption.

WHAT IF I CAN’T PAY MY COUNCIL TAX BILL?

Council Tax is compulsory and must be paid. If you don’t pay it or you fall behind on your payments, the council will send you a reminder letter. If you don’t pay after a few reminders then the council can take you to court.

If you’re struggling to pay your Council Tax because of financial difficulties, then seek advice as soon as you can to get some help. Talk to your local Age UK or Citizens Advice, or see Age UK’s debt advice section.

Councils may have a hardship fund available for people in financial difficulty. Contact your local council to find out what funds, if any, might be available and how to apply.
Are you claiming all the benefits you’re entitled to?

Brian Lee takes a look at benefits older people are entitled to receive

There are a range of benefits for older people, but many miss out on extra money they could be getting each week. It’s therefore well worth checking whether you might be entitled to more than you claim at the moment.

There are a number of ways you can do this, and steps you can take to improve your chances of success – and further information on both scores, as well as eligibility criteria and how exactly to lodge a claim can be found online.

Here, however, is a handy checklist of the main benefits available.

- **Attendance Allowance**
  Attendance Allowance is extra money you can claim if you’re over 65 and need regular help with your personal care. It is non-means tested, so you can claim it whatever your income or savings.

- **Pension Credit**
  Pension Credit can top up your low income if you’ve reached the qualifying age. Lots of people who qualify for it aren’t claiming it, so it’s worth checking if you’re eligible.

- **What is Carer’s Allowance?**
  Carer’s Allowance is a benefit for carers. If you spend time looking after a partner, relative or friend who has an illness or disability, you may be able to claim it.

- **Personal Independence Payment and Disability Living Allowance**
  If you’re under 65 and have ill health or a disability, you could be eligible for extra money to help with additional costs, through Personal Independence Payment or Disability Living Allowance.

- **Working-age Benefits**
  If you’re of working age, there are benefits you may be able to claim if you have a low income.

- **Bereavement benefits**
  We all need support after the death of someone close. Bereavement benefits provide extra money to ease the financial strain after the death of a spouse or civil partner if you’re under State Pension age. You can claim even if you’re not on a low income. There may be other financial help available.

- **Help with health costs**
  There’s a variety of help with health costs, available for over-60s. Some of it depends on your income and savings, and some of it is available to everyone.

- **Help in cold weather**
  Fuel bills can be a worry in winter, but it’s important for your health that your home stays warm. Find out if you’re eligible for extra money to help with the cost of heating your home when the weather gets colder.

- **Help with housing costs**
  If you’re on a low income and finding it difficult to pay the rent or mortgage, you may be able to apply for support.

- **Help with your Council Tax**
  Council Tax Support can help you if you’re on a low income and responsible for paying the Council Tax on your home. There may be other ways you can reduce your bill too. (See story on facing page)

- **Benefits in hospital and care homes**
  If you’re going into hospital or a care home, your benefits may be affected. You must tell the appropriate benefit office about any changes in your circumstances.

- **Benefits abroad**
  If you’re moving abroad, permanently or temporarily, or you’re returning to the UK, you’ll need to check how this affects any benefits you’re claiming. Whether you’ll still be eligible for benefits will depend on where you’re going and how long for or where you are returning from.

- **Grants from charities**
  When you’ve got very little money coming in, it can be difficult to budget for unexpected expenses. If you’re finding it hard to manage, you may be able to get extra help from charities and other organisations.
Pete Langford

Most people, when asked if they knew or have known anyone who was 100% liked by everyone, would be stumped. Those of us who knew him would just say “Pete Langford”, writes long-time friend and union colleague Malcolm Ferguson.

Amazing would not be too strong a word to use when talking about Pete. He was musically talented, a clever artist, a great cook and a kind and generous man loved by all who knew him.

He worked as a postal officer on the counter for almost 40 years, first in the West End of London, then in the City. During this time he worked tirelessly for the union. While preferring to be a “backroom boy,” he was nevertheless a great help to Wally Hawley and Johnny Johnson in the West End, then to myself in the City.

Pete had an incredible knack for getting to the exact point and stating his case calmly and clearly. He would also listen to others’ ideas carefully and give them full backing if he felt that they were right.

He taught me to be less aggressive in negotiations with management by quietly pointing out that this was counter-productive. Added to this, he was well liked by management, which was a great help.

He had a great wicked sense of humour, illustrated best by what he did when we were made to wear name badges. Many of the staff were worried about the security aspect of this and, after a female member of staff received an obscene call by someone who had found her name in the telephone directory, management relented and we were allowed to use a middle name only. Pete noticed that one of his fellow workers had SPENCER (his middle name) on the badge so the next day he came in with a homemade badge, which was perfectly made. He took a seat to SPENCER’s right and pinned on his badge on which said MARK SAND. So, from the customers view, they saw MARK SAND SPENCER, which greatly amused them. It goes without saying that they liked him as well.

To finish I must say he will be badly missed, not only by his wife Elle but also by his countless friends. He was only in his late 60s when he died, so no more will we hear the familiar Sunderland accent “Allo” on the phone. Rest in peace Pete.

Huglie Lenaghan

Former branch secretary of Harrow and District branch, Hughie Lenaghan has died. Hughie was the branch secretary of Harrow Amalgamated Branch for a number of years and was a very committed representative, who always put the members first.

Hughie also served on the LDC3 Committee, as a divisional rep in the South Central Division and was also elected as London regional secretary in the early 1990s.

“At this sad time our thoughts are of course with Hughie’s family and, on behalf of the CWU, I convey our deepest sympathy and condolences. He will be sorely missed by members, colleagues and friends within the union and the wider labour movement,” said CWU general secretary Dave Ward.

Mick Pottinger

Mick Pottinger lost his battle against cancer and passed away peacefully in hospital on 10 August 2018, aged 72, writes John Hunt, branch secretary of the Essex Amalgamated Branch.

Mick joined the GPO in 1967 as a postman in Southend-on-Sea and remained there until his retirement in 2015.

He held many positions within the union, including postman secretary, area distribution rep, area and processing rep and chair of the branch. He was also the retired members’ secretary until his death.

Mick was an extremely proud postal worker and a very well respected representative of this union; a proper ‘old school’ rep.

Mick was unwavering in his absolute commitment to the members he represented and wider union causes. Typically, back in May – even during his cancer treatment – he insisted on attending the ‘TUC New Deal for Workers’ rally in London, which was to be his last stand for working people.

His former [UPW] Southend & District Branch colleagues, who include Bill Crispin, Bob Gibson, John Hunt and Peter Metcalfe and of course his current CWU Essex Amalgamated Branch committee, will never forget his humour, his decency and his bravery in every battle he fought.