GP services and diagnostic private sector growing rapidly, says boss of Spire Healthcare

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Demand for independent GP appointments and diagnostic referrals is likely to grow significantly in 2023, predicts the boss of one of the UK's largest private hospital providers.

In an interview for Newcross Healthcare's Voices of Care podcast, Justin Ash, Chief Executive Officer of Spire Healthcare, said the NHS and the independent sector have worked together successfully for years to reduce waiting lists. During the pandemic this expanded as the private system provided resources to ease the burden on over-stretched NHS hospitals.

Now, as access to GP appointments becomes a growing issue for patients, the UK is seeing an explosion in private GP services, with a recent report showing that searches for private GPs increased 156% across three years to 2022.

Justin Ash explained: "We know that the GP service is hard-pressed. Many people are saying they're finding it hard to get a face-to-face appointment. The Spire GP offer is our fastest growing service. As soon as we open up new slots for face-to-face appointments, they're typically 25 minutes because there's a strong desire to sit down and build a relationship with the GP.

According to Spire Healthcare latest figures, demand for its private GP services was up 69% in 6 months to June 2022, compared to the same period in the previous year.

He also told the podcast that he expected similar growth in the use of private diagnostic services: "The demand for diagnosis is growing equally fast. Pathology, X-rays, MRI, etc. We're going to open Spire clinics, which are a combination of diagnostic centres, GP/community type services and non-general anaesthetic treatment so that we can take a bit of pressure off our hospitals because they're very busy.

"We can provide treatment in the community, and we can provide increased access to that entry point into healthcare because it's actually the entry point that people seem to be having the most difficulty with."

Mr Ash described the last few years as a "defining period" for the independent sector, which had changed people's attitudes on the service they provide.

He said: "We played such a vital role in providing NHS services. And I think it's absolutely true that millions of people got treatment who would not have done otherwise. And that was a fantastic partnership with the NHS.

Mr Ash also told of his concerns at a 'workforce crisis' in the UK currently and how the organisation had been turning to apprenticeships to solve the challenge:

"There is a workforce crisis in the UK. There's a workforce crisis globally. You can read about this in any developed nation. So, we have to be hugely alert to this, not just as providers, but as society because everything that we do, including tackling climate change, going to work, enjoying time with our families, is presaged on the fact that we have good health. Ultimately that good health is provided by the workforce, which is why I'm so passionate on the topic and why we're putting so much effort into thinking and acting on this.

"Apprenticeships have been transformational for Spire. We started relatively small. We've now got a workforce of 14,000, of which 500 and growing are apprenticeships in all sorts of areas. Of those, 200 are registered nurses. I think we've got the largest apprenticeship program for registered nurses.

"The bottom line is we have to grow our own. We have to develop more people in healthcare generally, not just in nursing, but in all the allied professions and supporting roles. What's wonderful about apprenticeships is, and they're not all young people, but people from all sorts of backgrounds.

"A lot of them have worked in food service or restaurants or, they've worked as security guards, and they've come into healthcare. They've typically come in to do a job like housekeeping and then they've been inspired to take an apprenticeship and maybe become a nurse."

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Company Contact:

Blue Lozenge

E. giles@bluelozenge.co.uk
W. https://www.bluelozenge.co.uk

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