

Newcastle Rheumatology Services – response to COVID-19

(Distribution: CCG leads Newcastle Gateshead, North Tyneside CCG, Northumberland CCG)

We have made significant changes to our Rheumatology services in the light of the COVID-19 pandemic. These changes have been made to secure our core services, protect our at-risk patients, and create capacity within the hospital.

Further information for patients and health professionals is available on our website, which we will keep updated (search for 'Newcastle Hospitals Rheumatology' or use link http://www.newcastle-hospitals.org.uk/services/musculoskeletal_services_rheumatology.aspx)

Routine outpatient appointments have been cancelled. We will still see a very limited number of urgent reviews or new patients each day, in a safe environment.

Day case unit appointments for infusions have been reviewed by a clinician, and delayed or cancelled where appropriate.

Patients should, in general, be continuing their existing immunosuppressives. We are continuing to monitor blood tests at our monitoring clinic; patients should still attend these clinics where possible. Strict guidance about the frequency of monitoring blood tests can be softened on a case-by-case basis. We have already circulated guidance on this.

We have issued around 2200 letters to high risk patients regarding 'shielding'. The criteria we have used are available on our website. These were used for pragmatic reasons but the default recommendations are those published by the British Society for Rheumatology (https://www.rheumatology.org.uk/Portals/0/Documents/Rheumatology_advice_coronavirus_immunosuppressed_patients_220320.pdf?ver=2020-03-24-171132-407).

Routine new patient referrals will be rejected with advice to re-refer when we can restore outpatient capacity. Please use the Advice and Guidance system where possible which will be checked daily, and patients contacted directly where necessary. Please note Advice and Guidance can now be used for existing patients where GPs have queries about their management. The on-call Rheumatology consultant can be contacted via Newcastle Hospitals switchboard for urgent cases (eg suspected GCA, vasculitis, connective tissue disease).

Patients under our care can contact us directly using our Rheumatology Advice line: **0191 213 7967**. We are running regular phone clinics, and are ensuring that we remain a source of advice for our patients and review them face to face when necessary.

Please get in touch if you have any additional queries.

With best wishes,

Dr Ben Thompson

Consultant Rheumatologist and Clinical lead for Rheumatology