The COVID-19 pandemic has caused huge issues within society.

The public are to be commended for listening to the Public Health messages of staying at home and staying away from hospitals.

We Cardiologists have further concerns though.

We have noticed that the number of patients coming to hospital with common cardiac conditions such as heart attacks has fallen away dramatically.

This is a pattern that has been seen in all regions affected by the COVID-19 outbreak.

We don’t think that there are any less patients suffering from these common cardiac conditions.

Instead we think that patients are avoiding seeking medical attention for their complaints because of the public advice given or perhaps because of a fear on being exposed to coronavirus if they attend the hospital.

There are excellent treatment options available for treating common cardiac conditions.

These help treat symptoms, treat and prevent against short and long term disability and prevent death.

Many of the common cardiac conditions such as heart attacks require urgent treatment to avoid complications. The most effective treatment only happens through fast diagnosis and then fast treatment of the cardiac condition and should not be ignored.

A failure to access healthcare professionals may have significant consequences for patients and their loved ones.

We in cardiology are very used to weighing up risks and benefits and coming to a balanced conclusion.

That is why we have introduced a new service for the people of the Western Trust which allows for a balanced approach. This new service aims to provide a more rapid and safer alternative for patients to come and see us.

We are asking patients with chest pain, shortness of breath, palpitations and blackouts to contact our service by telephone for initial assessment. This is a 24 hours per day, 7 days per week service. An experienced cardiac nurse will assess the history over the telephone. They will have full access to previous records. On the basis of the history provided, patients may be

1. Reassured that their history is not suggestive of a cardiac complaint
2. Offered a face-to-face assessment to include blood tests, ECGs and X rays. This may be recommended immediately or at a set time on the same day or following day.
3. Informed to phone 999 to access emergency services if the nurse is concerned

The face-to-face assessments for Fermanagh and West Tyrone as far north as Strabane town will be in Omagh’s Cardiac Assessment Unit. For patients north of Strabane, in Derry/Londonderry and in the Limavady area, patients will be assessed in Altnagelvin hospital. Assessment in Altnagelvin will be done in an area beside the Cardiology ward (Ward 44/CCU) and away from the Emergency Department (A&E) between 8am and 10pm or in a non-COVID area of the Emergency Department outside of these hours (from 10pm to 8am).

We will try to avoid face-to-face assessments unless we feel it is necessary.

We strongly advise that you access help in this way if you have the symptoms discussed above.

The number to call is

02882833129

Or

02877246958

We wish you well throughout this period in particular and want you to know that we are here to help you as in normal times.