

Online consulting

By Dr Ashwin Ramachandra, CCG Governing Body Co-Chair and GP at Market Street Medical Practice



It would be hard not to have noticed how much we are being encouraged to offer an –‘on line’ option to our patients. So much so that the CCG has commissioned a provider (EGTON) and are supporting practices to try it out.

We, at Market Street Medical Practice, have always been looking at innovative solutions to manage challenges facing provision of health care to our population. We wanted to improve access to our patients which was also an alternative to the traditional options, we wanted to ensure the patients were seen by the most appropriate person depending on their needs. We also wanted to reduce waiting times on our phone lines.

We over time have been able demonstrate reduction in call waiting time, average 15-16 GP appointment saved in a week. 83% of the users said if online consultations was not available they would have asked for an appointment. Unlike our initial assumption 68% of the users were between ages 45-74yrs. Patients with deafness have found this service very useful as they were able to communicate much more easily with the practice.

From a process perspective our staff review the communications on dedicated time twice a day. They also find this service helpful as they feel there is another option at their disposal to offer patients, and easier to manage the phone call on paper.

The system itself is user friendly and hasn't required specific technical skills to implement. We continue to advertise the option to patients and will continue to review the system and its impact in terms of same day demand and number of incoming phone calls.

Our Practice Manager Leon Xavier had the following to say about the system.

‘We were slightly ahead of the curve, launching online consultations around two years ago and ensured that we grew this new concept gently with patients and clinicians alike, who initially needed reassurance around the safety and effectiveness of this new concept.

Gentle persuasion and close review along the way paid off and this offering is now popular with patients and staff alike. We are now averaging around five online consultations a day; from a patient perspective the feedback has been that it is great to have their queries resolved in the two working day time frame, as well as on most occasions negating the need for a face-to-face appointment, whereby medications are prescribed directly from the online consultation and sent electronically. Clinicians are assured that the intelligent software guides patients through all the requisite questions that they would ask in a face-to-face consultation, as per the symptoms they select, as well as highlighting and signposting any red-flag issues to a more appropriate service, if needed. For frontline staff it is a luxury to have something else to offer, other than having to say “there are no appointments left today”!

Since launch, we have seen steady reductions of incoming call volumes as patients have moved onto this digital system, as well as having more face-to-face appointment availability, for more complex patients who need these most.

The key learning we have taken from the last two years has been to have the entire team promote online consultations in as many patient conversations as possible, even if it did not seem immediately relevant, and to explain it in layman terms, along the lines of, “Did you know, you can start a consultation with our GPs online? Just visit our website and someone will get back to you within two days...”

We are delighted to see our early adoption of online consultations was the right way to go and the benefits are now being recognised nationally. We are positive that as the demand of an ever expectant patient population increases, this new way of working will give us some much needed headroom to best match those needs to the resources available whilst offering patients a convenient, simple and up-to-date way of consulting, fit for the future.'

Our view at Market Street is that this is something we would very much encourage practices to try and to give patients time to adapt to a different way to access General Practice. We have seen positive results from both practice capacity and patient experience perspectives. With the shared knowledge and experience of all the practices using the system we can potentially improve access for our patients, whilst managing our capacity pressures in a different way.

If you have any queries, comments or wanted a demonstration of the system then please contact Joe Corbett (josephcorbett@nhs.net) or Sheila Mills (sheila.mills3@nhs.net), who will be happy to help.