
Review of GP patient engagement in Southend (March 2014)

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Background

In March we wrote to practice managers at all 37 GP surgeries in Southend, asking for information about their Patient Participation Groups (PPGs). The responses were supplemented by phone calls to surgeries where we were aware of PPG representatives. The responses from the 19 responding surgeries are given as an appendix to this report.

From the replies and interviews we have drawn a number of conclusions relating to the operation of PPGs in Southend.

Current situation

Most practices have been pro-active in attempting to recruit PPG members, but with varying success. In terms of representation, of those practices with an active PPG, over half reported difficulty in attracting members of varying age and ethnicity. At present, members tend to be of white British background and predominantly over sixty years of age. Two practices have made efforts to encourage patients in under-represented groups to engage.

Administrative support

In most surgeries the practice manager provides the secretarial services to the PPG. In one surgery a patient takes on this role and the PPG operates itself with the support of the surgery. Other surgeries have tried to obtain secretarial support from the patients with limited success.

Time restraints on practice managers are considerable, especially for the 16 'single-handed' GP surgeries that have little flexibility in their schedule.

NHS enhanced services

NHS England offers GPs extra payments for providing a variety of services, one of which is a patient participation scheme. There are a number of conditions attached to gaining the extra funds and, although the question was not asked as part of the survey, we do not know of any Southend surgery that has received the payment.

One of the qualifications for funding is to show the group is representative of the practice population and demonstrate what the practice has done to make the group as representative as possible. Diversity is obviously important in a representative group but the exercise to satisfy this requirement is time consuming and must involve practice administrative staff resource that is often not available.

Recruitment

Most recruitment is done by contacting patients likely to be interested. With follow up, this will usually get a group together for an initial meeting.

Once a small group is formed, the opportunity for members to sit in the waiting room talking to patients about the services, inviting suggestions to improve procedures in the surgery and inviting patients to join the group or virtual group, often helps increase numbers.

Virtual groups

The number of patients available to attend a meeting during the day or early evening is restricted. This results in groups not representing the

diversity of the patient cohort. Five practices though have created virtual groups to communicate with through email and social media.

The most effective method of recruiting patients to the virtual group is used by a surgery requesting email addresses from patients to enable them to renew prescriptions using email. The application form includes a clause that automatically joins the patient to the virtual group unless they opt out. As a result, the surgery has 600 members of its virtual group.

Doctor involvement

In addition to the arranged questions we also gained an idea of doctor involvement in PPGs. Some attend regularly but most seem to have a doctor attending for at least some of the meeting on an occasional basis.

Talks

Five practices invite speakers to PPG meetings. Discussions on practice services and developments that affect them is useful to obtain patient views but there are many health and social service bodies that can provide speakers to give a wider perspective of health services to PPG members.

Questionnaires

Patient questionnaires are carried out by 14 of the 19 respondents. Some use websites to attract replies, some PPG members sit in the waiting room and ask patients for their views. This also gives them the opportunity to invite patients to join the PPG or the virtual group.

Newsletters

A few surgeries write newsletters but more circulate notes of PPG meetings. Keeping in touch with members occasionally is important. Could the Healthwatch monthly newsletter be used as a basis to give health and social service information to PPG and virtual group members?

Appendix

Patient engagement indicators

37 GP requests for information were sent by us. 19 responses were received, from which we have collated the following information:

How many practices have a PPG which meets regularly?

14 practices have an active PPG, although intervals between meetings vary:

- 2 meet monthly
- 8 meet approximately every two months
- 1 meets quarterly
- 1 meets every six months
- 2 meet at variable intervals throughout the year

Of the 5 practices which do not currently have a PPG:

- 2 have tried to attract members, but as yet no interest has been expressed
- 1 is currently in the process of forming a new group
- 1 has not had a Practice Manager for eighteen months
- 1 made no mention of intent to form a group

Do practices invite speakers to PPG meeting?

5 practices have invited speakers to meetings.

How many practices have a 'virtual' PPG?

5 practices have a virtual PPG in addition to a group which meets. In addition

1 surgery mentioned a recent campaign drive to attract members to a virtual group

How many practices carry out patient surveys/questionnaires?

14 practices regularly carry out patient surveys. Results are posted on practice websites and on notice boards

Several practices report having implemented changes as a result of patient feedback on a range of issues, from improving waiting-times to re-designing the waiting area

However, one surgery reported no responses, having sent out approximately one hundred questionnaires

How many practices have a suggestion box?

3 practices have suggestion boxes in the waiting area, which patients are encouraged to use and are checked regularly.

1 other practice had a comment book in reception and reported that comments are always responded to. The same practice also used a 'day diary', used to record patients' views for all staff to see.

How many practices have a newsletter?

3 practices issue a seasonal newsletter.

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