
Babylon: GP consultations via a smartphone app

“We want people to access the healthcare professionals they need when they need it.”

Background

On the 31st March, 2015, Healthwatch attended a meeting of the Patient Participation Group (PPG) at the Highlands GP Practice in Leigh-on-Sea. The PPG is a small, organised and proactive group, with a lively and engaged membership. They involve themselves with issues affecting the practice, as well as those affecting wider healthcare in Southend. Discussions at the meeting included preparations for a large scale Asthma Health Event, organised by the practice and scheduled to take place on April 22nd, and an ongoing campaign to secure Vascular Hub status for Southend Hospital.

It was clear to us that there is a good working relationship between the Practice Manager, the GPs, and the patients. On the basis of this meeting, and the detailed minutes of the previous meeting, Healthwatch Southend regards the PPG at Highlands as a good example of how such a group should operate.

The purpose of our attendance at the PPG was to hear about Babylon - a smartphone app that allows patients to book a video or audio consultation with a GP.

Babylon is being piloted in England by the Highlands Surgery and the Eastwood Group of GP practices. Healthwatch Southend understands that the service has previously been operational in Jersey, Northern Ireland, and in the private sector. It is unclear whether these were pilot schemes or whether the service is in common use in these parts of the UK.

Present at the meeting were two representatives from Babylon, one of whom gave a brief presentation and answered questions.

What is Babylon?

Babylon is an app-based service that allows patients to receive a video or audio consultation with a GP at relatively short notice, through their smartphone. The service is aimed at patients who have apparently minor ailments and are unable to secure appointments with their local GP. It aims to provide an appointment, usually on the same day, at a convenient time for the patient. The service can also provide one off health advice via a text message-based service.

How it works

The service is available from Monday to Saturday between the hours of 8am and 8pm.

Patients download the Babylon app onto their smartphone. Accessing the service requires the patient to log in. They can then select a convenient time for an appointment and can choose whether they want an audio or a video consultation. We were informed by the Babylon rep that the majority of patients choose the video option.

NHS patients will be provided with a promo code that they enter into the app. This will allow them to access the service for free.

There is the option to attach a photograph to the appointment request. This is useful if the patient has physical symptoms, for example a rash. The image can be reviewed in advance by the GP prior to the consultation taking place.

The app sends a reminder five minutes before an appointment is due to begin.

Babylon is currently available on Android or iOS (iphone Operating System) smart phones or tablets.

The GPs

Patients who book a video or audio appointment on Babylon will not receive a consultation with a GP from their practice. The service is staffed by NHS GPs and, in a sense, can be regarded as a virtual approximation of a GP walk in centre, like the one at St Luke's.

The GPs employed by the service do not have access to a patient's GP health records however they will have access to information gathered from previous calls to Babylon. Conversations are recorded and information from the call is fed back to the patient's GP.

Healthwatch Southend is of the opinion that the service will not be suitable for patients who want to discuss long-term health conditions as this would require, at the very least, access to health records and probably also some insight from a GP who is familiar with the patient's medical history.

Babylon GPs are able to write prescriptions and then fax them to a selected list of six pharmacies - one in Rayleigh, three in the Leigh-on-Sea/ Benfleet area and two in East London. At the time of writing these were as follows:

- Audley Mills Pharmacy, 55 Eastwood Road, Rayleigh, Essex, SS6 7JF
- Belfairs Pharmacy, 327 Eastwood Road North, Leigh-on-Sea, Essex, SS9 4LT
- French's Chemist, 1735 London Road, Leigh-on-Sea, Essex, SS9 2SW
- Daynite Pharmacy, 261 London Road, Hadleigh, Benfleet, Essex, SS7 2BN
- Boots Pharmacy, 11 Octagon Arcade, London, EC2M 2AB
- Boots Pharmacy, 140 Fenchurch Street, London, EC3M 6BL

If a patient wants to collect their medication from a different pharmacy then a paper prescription can be sent to them at their home address via first class post.

Babylon GPs are unable to prescribe controlled drugs to patients.

There are some limits as to who can use the service: Babylon will not offer consultations to patients where there are mental capacity issues.

Consultations will not be available for newborns (patients under 28 days old). Patients aged between 28 days and 16 years must log in to the service using their parent or guardian's account.

Babylon GPs are unable to refer patients to secondary care.

Privacy

Babylon GPs undertake consultations in a private room. Information from the consultations is stored on secure servers. No information from the call is recorded on the patient's smartphone.

Details of the Pilot scheme

The pilot scheme at Highlands Surgery will go live on April 2nd.

It has been advertised in the practice newsletter, in leaflets, and on posters at the surgery. The practice also plans to text its patients with details of the service.

The pilot will run for two years

Babylon has been commissioned through the NHS.

Other considerations

Healthwatch Southend has some minor concerns around safeguards for patients:

1. We were told that there was an onus on patients using the service to inform consulting GPs of any medication they were taking.

We are curious as to whether the GPs on the Babylon service ask any set questions regarding the patient's general health, any long-term conditions or allergies they have, and any medication they are currently taking. We believe that this information would be necessary in order to ensure that the advice provided by the GPs is appropriate for the patient, and that any medication prescribed does not exacerbate pre-existing conditions or conflict with medication already being taken by the patient.

2. Given that a record of the consultation is sent to the patient's GP we wondered whether any time would be set aside to at GP practices to review these reports as they come in. If the service does prove popular will there be adequate time to go over these reports and avoid a backlog. We have since been informed by the Acting Practice Manager that "all reports are currently reviewed to ensure in the first instance that any teething problems are being ironed out. Once this has been proven to work then the system will be processed in the same way that 111 reports are processed."
3. At the PPG meeting, Healthwatch Southend mentioned medication reviews, which currently require a GP appointment slot but are often dealt with very quickly and sometimes require a GP to do little more than sign off on medication prescribed by consultants at the hospital. We wondered whether the Babylon service might be adapted in the future to allow reviews of this kind to be conducted via a video chat, in the interests of freeing-up face-to-face appointments. We were told by the Practice Manager that this might be a consideration in the future.

4. Healthwatch Southend is also curious as to whether Babylon GPs are able to make urgent referrals to a patient's GP if they feel that a conventional face-to-face appointment is required.