

GP surgeries

Supporting patients during Covid-19



August 2020

Background

Healthwatch Oxfordshire contacted the Practice Managers of all GP practices in July 2020 to hear how the Covid-19 pandemic has impacted on their surgeries delivery of service to their patient community. We also wanted to hear the good experiences from both the surgery and patients as well as how they will be planning to deliver services in the future.

Of the 73 Practice Managers contacted 14 completed the online survey.

Communicating with patients

Many GP surgery's used multiple methods of communicating with their patients during the Covid-19 pandemic. Text message and via the GP website both received the most responses (14 each). Other methods used were:

- Notices in surgery
- Emails
- Letters
- Welfare check phone calls were made by one surgery to patients over 70
- A community bulletin was produced using a Patient Panel
- Social media was also a popular way to keep in touch with patients, mainly via Facebook, some of which have been set up and managed by the surgery's Patient Participation Group (PPG). A few surgery's also have Twitter and Blog pages

Although it has been a stressful period for all. We feel that we have offered outstanding service to our patients, and our staff have pulled together really well during this time.

Changes in services

Covid-19 Hub Clinics are now running where patients with suspected Covid-19 infection have been treated instead of them attending the surgery. Most of the practice managers who replied explained other changes to the services they offered in practice were that:

- They no longer offered walk in surgeries
- Patients are triaged over the phone and the best way to consult with them is discussed including:
 - be it by text
 - sending photographs
 - email
 - tele-video consultation
 - or a face to face appointment where deemed necessary
- Another practice manager explained that all patients contacted the practice using e-consult. Where patients cannot complete this themselves, they could call the practice and reception staff would offer support to complete the form
- Covid-19 has resulted in one practice manager commenting about the loss of the external capacity to offer the 7 Day Access Service

What do patients think of the changes?

Many of the replies received commented that their patients have been very positive in understanding the need for change, whilst appreciating the continuation of service and the options available to them.

The over 70's have been extremely grateful for the welfare calls.

We have used our social prescribing services and mental health link workers to provide additional support.

Are there concerns about how practices can continue to deliver services?

There is concern from some practice managers around the Flu Vaccine campaign which is due to start in late September, mainly due to the number of patients involved and having to keep to the social distancing rules.

We are getting busier, but we have not got the physical space we need

We have concerns that we are now getting busier in practice and having to stagger surgeries/patient attendance.

We are still working with the various village community groups to ensure that those patients who need home deliveries, are still able to get their medication

Examples of good practice

One example is given was from a practice manager who said that they have continued to ensure that their practice is as virtually accessible as possible, and tried to make sure that vulnerable, housebound or “at high risk shielding” patients are kept in touch with. This is done through the practice itself, the voluntary groups social prescribers or other local charities. Calling shielding, vulnerable and at-risk patients was also mentioned by other replies to the survey.

Other examples of good practice include:

- Improved access to named doctor
- Regular communications, Facebook, and blog
- Opportunity to have basic nursing procedures and blood tests carried out in the car park

We call our at-risk patients to see if they were ok, we also call our mental health patients and elderly to offer support

We have worked with all of our “wrap-around” services

Communicating with Patient Participation Group

In a letter dated 14 April 2020 from NHS England it was advised that specific terms that could be suspended under the GP contracts during the Coronavirus pandemic including 'Engagement with and review of feedback from Patient Participation Groups (PPG)'.¹

Ten of the respondents commented that they were in touch with their PPG but said that due to many PPG members shielding their main communication channel was by email, phone and occasionally by virtual meetings.

Comment:

Healthwatch Oxfordshire is concerned that practices re-engage with their PPG as soon as possible. PPGs can be a big asset to practices in communicating with patients. The voluntary help provided by PPGs including during the flu vaccination period can make the difference to patients receiving timely treatment and support.

Working across Primary Care Network

Of the 21 Primary Care Networks in Oxfordshire, 8 of the 14 respondents named PCNs they were part of, and have been working across their PCN including:

- Supporting each other
- Meeting virtually to keep in touch and pass on good practice and discuss ways of improving patient care and services across the network
- Carrying on with the essential set up and development work of the PCN
- Holding weekly Microsoft Teams support meetings

We collaborated to set up a dedicated Covid Clinic for those patients who described relevant symptoms over the phone and were able to be directed to the clinic without having to come to the surgery.

¹ <https://www.england.nhs.uk/coronavirus/wp-content/uploads/sites/52/2020/03/C0264-GP-preparedness-letter-14-April-2020.pdf>