

Martha's Rule: Getting the right help when it matters most

Neighbourhood health and wellbeing insights – August 2026



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Summary

Healthwatch are here to hear about your experiences of using local services and the issues that matter to you. We have the power to make sure that NHS leaders and other decision makers listen to your feedback and use it to improve standards of care.

Martha's Rule is a new way for patients and families to quickly raise concerns if someone's condition is worsening. The purpose of this project was to learn whether or not people were aware of Martha's Rule and establish the best way it can be communicated to patients and families in Swindon.

Engagement activities were carried out between April and June 2026, including a public survey, community outreach, workshops, and visits to wards at Great Western Hospital (GWH).

The below summary gives an overview of the main points. More detail, including full findings and recommendations, can be found in the main report.

Key findings

- **Awareness and understanding of Martha's Rule are limited** – with only 43% of respondents having heard of it and many unclear about its purpose. It is often confused with other services, particularly PALS, highlighting a need for clearer communication and differentiation.
- **Strong support for the concept** – 65% of respondents feeling comfortable using Martha's Rule and 77% believing it could improve patient safety. Some concerns were raised about how consistently it will be applied in practice.
- **Emphasised importance for clear, accessible and widely available information** – with most (59%) stating it should always be available. Preferences for where and how information should be shared varied, indicating the need for a multifaceted approach across healthcare and community settings.

Overall, there is a clear **willingness to engage with Martha's Rule**, but improved awareness, clearer messaging, and more inclusive communication are needed to ensure it is understood and used effectively.

Key recommendations

- **Improving awareness through consistent and coordinated communication** – ensuring that messaging about Martha’s Rule is clear, repeated, and visible across all relevant settings so more people understand what it is and how to use it.
- **Clearly differentiating Martha’s Rule from PALS and other services** – providing simple guidance to help patients and families understand when to use each service and reduce confusion or delays in escalation. With the option of adopting a poster created by Healthwatch Swindon, based on the feedback received from respondents.
- **Use a multi-channel, accessible approach to communication** – sharing information across hospital, community, and digital settings in a range of formats and languages (e.g. posters, videos, easy-read and translated materials) to maximise reach, support different needs, and ensure inclusivity.
- **Embedding clear and consistent messaging at key patient touchpoints** – ensuring information is routinely available during hospital admission and throughout inpatient settings, so it is accessible when needed.

Overall, the report highlights a clear opportunity to increase awareness, reduce confusion, and improve access to information, ensuring that patients and families are empowered to raise concerns and support early escalation of care, ultimately contributing to people getting the right help when it matters most.

Thank you

We would like to express our sincere gratitude to all those who took part in this project. We are especially appreciative of GWH for enabling our visit to the Trust and for arranging the opportunity to speak with patients, and to the many community settings that welcomed us and supported the promotion of this work.

Introduction

About Healthwatch

Healthwatch is your independent champion for health and social care. We listen to people's experiences, amplify their voices, and ensure decision-makers understand what matters most to local communities. Our role is to help shape the design and delivery of health and care services, so they truly reflect people's needs. We are independent and impartial, and anything you share with us is confidential. We can also help you find reliable, trustworthy information and advice to support you in getting the care and support you need.

Background

Martha's Rule was introduced following the death of 13-year-old Martha Mills in 2021, after concerns that her deteriorating condition in hospital was not acted upon. A coroner concluded that earlier escalation to intensive care would likely have prevented her death, highlighting the need for a more robust approach to recognising and responding to patient deterioration.

The initiative aims to support the early identification and escalation of the deterioration of patients' health, while promoting a cultural shift within healthcare that empowers staff, patients, families and carers to speak up and have their concerns listened to and acted upon. It recognises that those closest to the patient may identify early warning signs of deterioration before they are clinically evident.

Martha's Rule provides a 24/7 escalation route, enabling staff, patients, families and carers to request an urgent review from an independent clinical team if they feel that deterioration is not being appropriately recognised or managed. Early evidence indicates that the initiative is improving patient safety, with escalation calls leading to changes in care, including potentially life-saving interventions.

Martha's Rule is being rolled out across all acute hospitals in England and has now been implemented at GWH in Swindon. [NHS England » Martha's Rule rolled out to all acute hospitals](#)

It is important to note that Martha's Rule applies only to patients who are currently admitted to hospital. For all other patient safety concerns, issues should continue to be raised in accordance with local practice guidelines or via the Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS).

NHS England identifies three core components of Martha's Rule – [NHS England » Martha's Rule](#):

1. **Daily patient engagement:** Patients should be asked, at least once a day, how they are feeling and whether their condition is improving or worsening. This information must be recorded and acted upon in a structured and timely way.

2. **Staff escalation process:** All staff must be able to request a review from an alternative clinical team at any time if they are concerned that a patient's deterioration is not being appropriately recognised or managed.
3. **Patient and family escalation:** This escalation route must also be accessible to patients, their families and carers, and clearly communicated across the hospital.

What we did

Between April and June 2026, the project was promoted through a range of channels, including community and hospital engagement activities, social media, news e-bulletins, and professional networks. These methods were used to capture a broad range of perspectives from patients, families, staff, and the wider community.

We used a self-selecting survey, relying on individuals choosing to participate. A total of **115 completed responses** were received, alongside several partial responses. Analysis within this report is based on completed responses only.



In addition to survey data, qualitative feedback was gathered through conversations during engagement activities, supporting a richer understanding of awareness and perceptions of Martha's Rule.

The survey covered eight core questions designed to assess awareness of Martha's Rule and preferences for how information should be communicated. To maintain confidentiality, no demographic data was collected. As a result, findings cannot be segmented by respondent group (e.g. patients or staff), which may limit more detailed analysis. The survey is included in the appendix.

A targeted workshop was delivered with **nine Afghan women** in attendance, where information was provided in both English and Dari. This supported engagement with underrepresented groups and ensured a more inclusive approach to gathering feedback.

As part of our engagement plan, visits were carried out to **Saturn, Jupiter and Kingfisher wards** at GWH. These visits focused on speaking directly with staff, patients and family members to capture real-time experiences and views. This activity focused on engagement and feedback rather than formal Enter and View observations.

What we heard

Engagement activities and survey responses highlighted several key themes relating to awareness, understanding, and communication of Martha's Rule.

Overall, the project generated strong interest, with many participants welcoming the opportunity to learn more about Martha's Rule and discuss its purpose. However, findings consistently indicated that **awareness and understanding remain limited**.

Awareness and understanding

Findings demonstrate that general awareness of Martha's Rule is low and, where awareness does exist, understanding is often limited. The concept was frequently **confused with wider feedback mechanisms**, particularly the Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS).

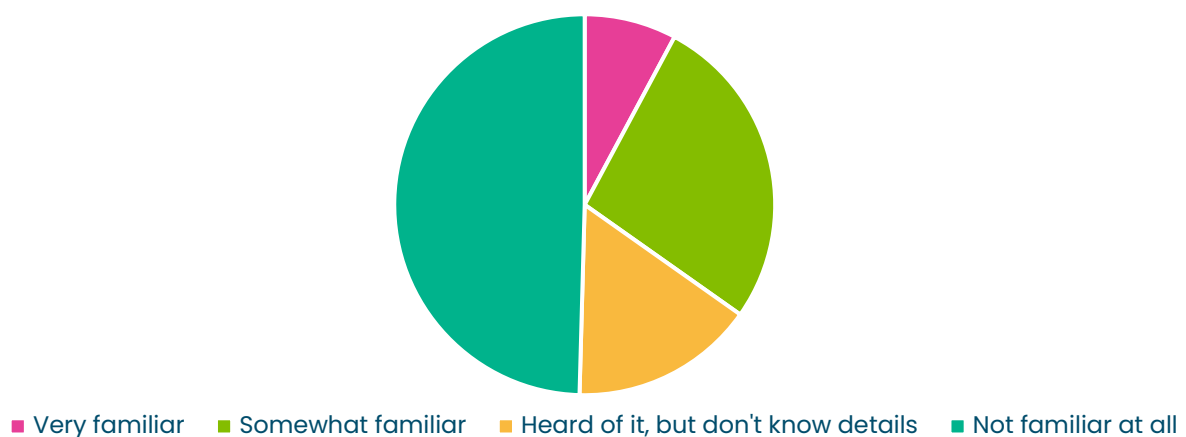
This lack of clarity was reinforced during both community engagement and ward visits, where participants highlighted the need for clearer differentiation between Martha's Rule and other routes for raising concerns. This is important to ensure individuals seek the **right support at the right time**.

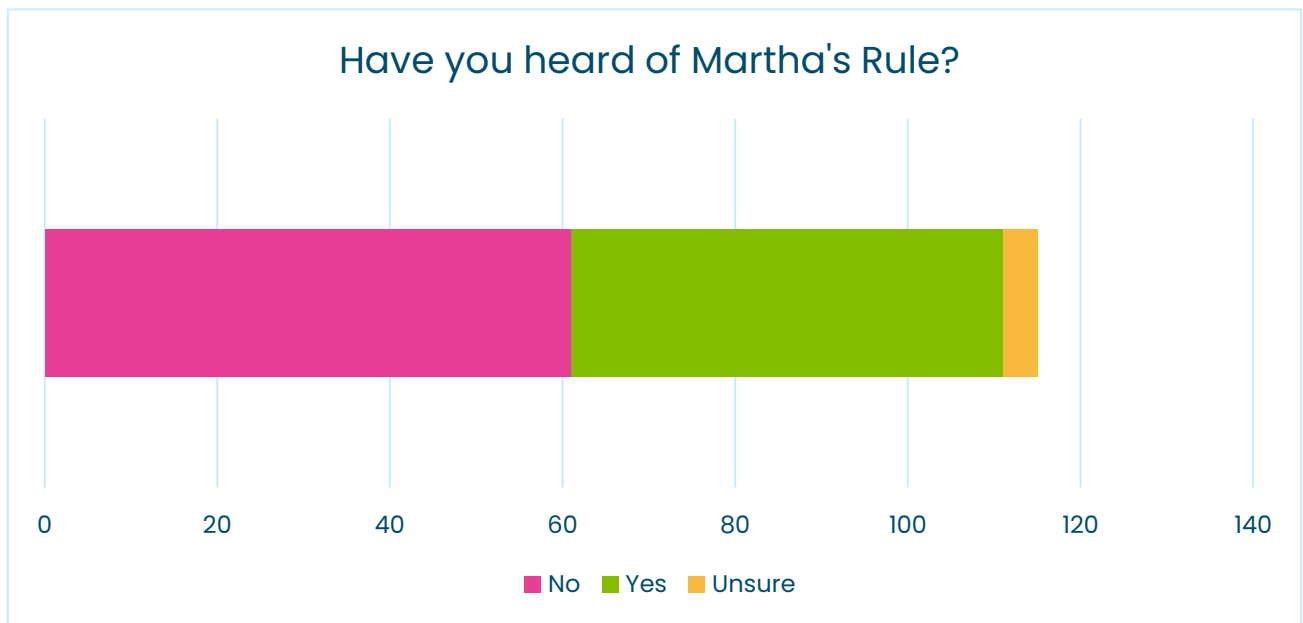
Survey results support this finding:

- **50%** of respondents reported being unfamiliar with what Martha's Rule allows patients or families to do
- Awareness was relatively evenly split, with **43%** having heard of Martha's Rule compared to **53%** who had not

Together, these findings suggest that not only is awareness inconsistent, but there is also a **gap between recognition and understanding**.

How familiar are you with what Martha's Rule allows patients or families to do?





Confidence and perceived value

Despite low awareness, there was a **generally positive perception** of Martha's Rule once explained.

- 65% of respondents said they would feel comfortable using it
- 77% believed it could improve patient safety

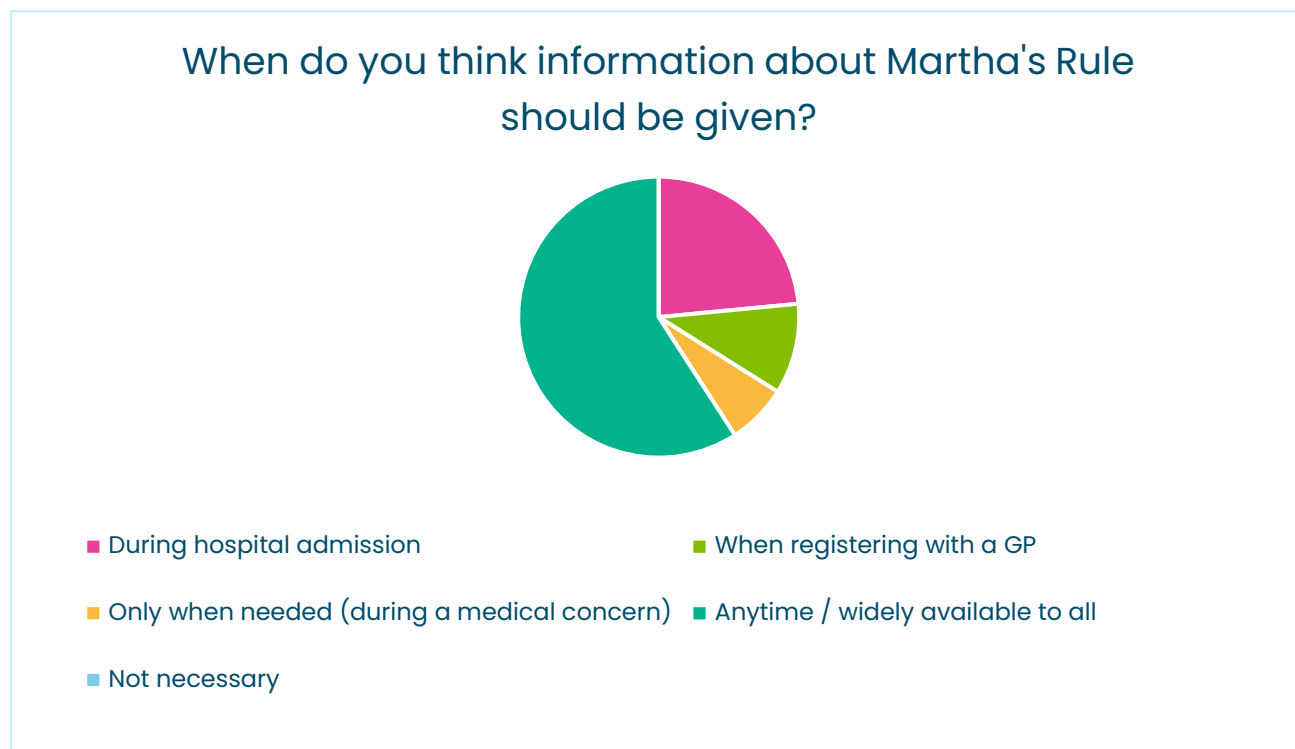
However, some respondents qualified their answers, noting this would depend on the rule being **applied consistently and effectively in practice**. This suggests underlying concerns about how the process may operate in real-world settings.

Information needs: when and where

Participants expressed a strong preference for **proactive and widespread communication**.

- 59% felt information should be available at all times
- 23% preferred information during hospital admission

Although fewer respondents selected GP settings, discussions indicated that **information provided via GP practices would be trusted**, suggesting an opportunity to use primary care channels more effectively.



Preferences for where information should be shared showed a clear expectation that messaging should be:

- **Widely distributed**
- Delivered across **both healthcare and community settings**

Suggestions included hospitals, GP practices, schools, community groups, and public spaces. Participants also emphasised the importance of reaching individuals who may not access digital platforms.

Format and accessibility

There was no clear preference for a single format, indicating the need for a **multi-channel, inclusive approach**.

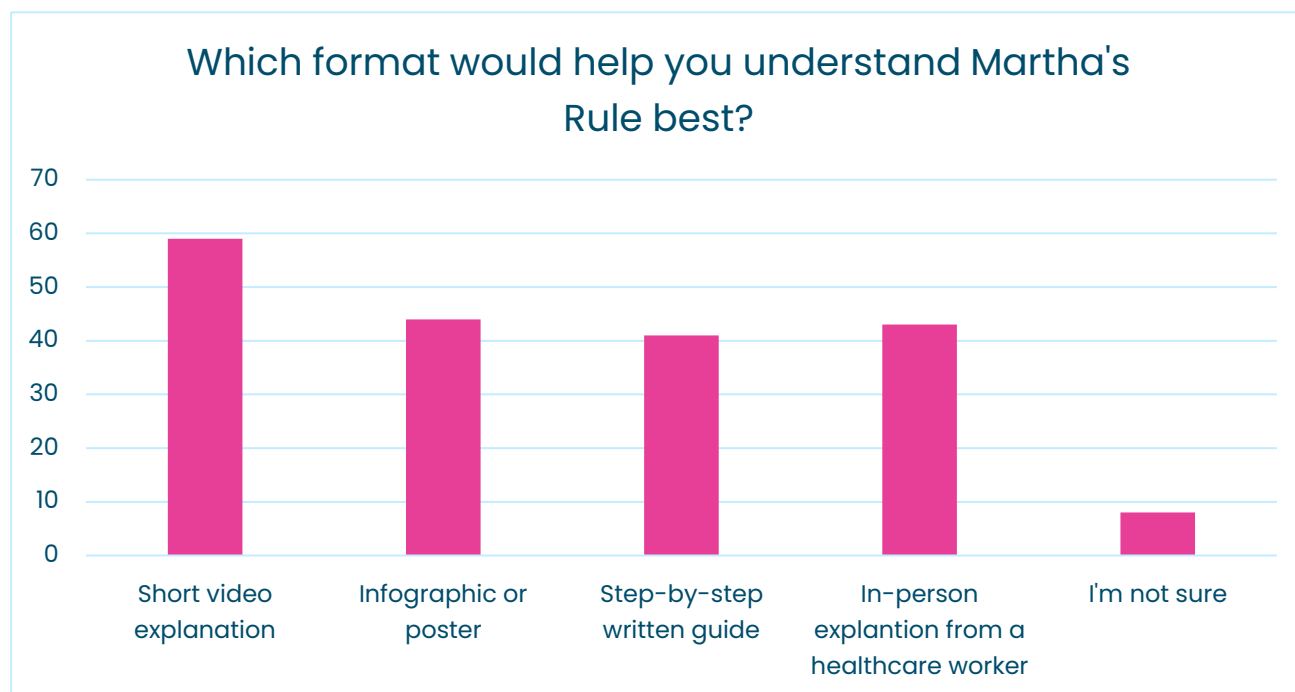
Formats such as videos, posters, written guides, and in-person explanations were all selected in similar proportions. Only a small number of respondents were unsure, reinforcing that **diverse communication methods are required to meet different needs**.

Encouragingly, engagement levels were high:

- **77%** reported they would be very likely to engage with information about Martha's Rule
- **21%** said they would be somewhat likely

This demonstrates a strong willingness to learn, provided information is accessible and clearly presented.

Participants also highlighted the importance of **accessible formats**, including translations (e.g. Dari), easy-read materials, and targeted engagement with communities who may face additional barriers to access.



Recommendations

The following recommendations are based on the insights and experiences shared by the people who contributed to this report.

These recommendations will collectively increase awareness, improve understanding, and enable timely escalation of care concerns, ultimately supporting safer patient outcomes.

1. Improve awareness through consistent communication

We encourage GWH and the local Integrated Care Board (ICB) who commission NHS services in Swindon, to use our findings to deliver a coordinated communication plan, increasing awareness of Martha's Rule across both the hospital and in the community. Ensuring more patients, families and staff know about Martha's Rule, increasing the likelihood that concerns are raised early.

2. Clearly differentiate Martha's Rule from PALS and other services

From the feedback received, we have created a poster explaining when and how to use Martha's Rule and PAL's, helping patients and families understand when and how to use each service. Reducing confusion, helping people choose the correct escalation route and avoid delays in urgent situations. You can download the poster [here](#).

3. Use a multi-channel approach to information sharing

Distribute information across a range of settings, including hospital wards, GP practices, community venues, and digital platforms, to widen reach and visibility. Maximising the chances of information being seen and understood across different settings and population groups.

4. Provide information in multiple formats and ensure accessibility

Resources should be made available in a variety of formats (e.g. posters, leaflets, short videos, and verbal explanations) including translated materials, easy-read versions, and targeted engagement with communities who may face barriers to accessing information. In turn reducing health inequalities by enabling people with language barriers, disabilities, or limited digital access to engage with the process.

5. Embed information at key patient touchpoints

Ensure information about Martha's Rule is routinely provided during hospital admission and visible throughout inpatient settings, while also being available more widely. This will help normalise its use, strengthen confidence in escalation processes, and support consistent application.

Overall, these actions will help ensure that concerns about deterioration are recognised, escalated, and acted upon more effectively, contributing to improved patient safety and experience.

In addition, Healthwatch Swindon recognises our own part in sharing reliable and consistent information. Using the resources gathered during this project, we will ensure that they are made available on our website, for individuals, communities and local organisations to download and use freely.

Conclusion

This project has demonstrated that, while there is strong support for the principles of Martha's Rule, awareness and understanding remain limited among patients, families and the wider community. Confusion with existing services, particularly PALS, highlights the need for clearer communication and guidance.

Encouragingly, findings show a clear willingness to engage with and use Martha's Rule, alongside recognition of its potential to improve patient safety. However, to realise this potential, information must be clear, accessible, and consistently available across a range of settings and formats.

The implementation of Martha's Rule at GWH presents a valuable opportunity to strengthen escalation processes and empower patients, families and staff to raise concerns. It is positive to note that GWH have welcomed these findings and are keen to use them to enhance how Martha's Rule is communicated across the organisation.

By acting on the recommendations outlined in this report, there is significant potential to increase awareness, reduce confusion, and ensure concerns about deterioration are recognised and acted upon promptly. Continued engagement and evaluation will be important to ensure Martha's Rule becomes embedded in practice and delivers meaningful improvements in patient safety and experience.

Next steps

Embedding these improvements into practice:

- Publish and share the report and supporting resources with GWH, local ICB, the public, and local organisations.
- Work with GWH to develop and roll out clear, accessible communication materials across the hospital.
- Embed information at key patient touchpoints, including admission and ward environments.
- Use a range of formats and channels to improve reach and accessibility. Including making any resources available on Healthwatch Swindon's website and taking printable resources on all community engagements.
- Continue collaboration between Healthwatch Swindon and GWH to monitor progress and refine approaches.
- To make future surveys in an easy-read format to improve accessibility.

Provider response

Luisa Goddard, Chief Nurse, The Great Western Hospital

Great Western Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust welcomes the Healthwatch findings and the valuable feedback provided by patients, families and carers.

We are pleased the report recognises the positive impact of Martha's Rule and the commitment of our staff to ensuring concerns are heard and acted upon. We acknowledge the recommendation to increase awareness of the service and have already identified actions to strengthen promotion, accessibility and understanding of Martha's Rule across our organisation.

We remain fully committed to ensuring patients, families and carers feel empowered to raise concerns and seek a rapid clinical review when needed. We will continue to work with Healthwatch and our partners to support ongoing improvement and provide the safest possible care.

Appendix

Questionnaire

1. Before today, had you heard of Martha's Rule?

- ☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Unsure

2. How familiar are you with what Martha's Rule allows patients or families to do?

- ☐ Very familiar
☐ Somewhat familiar
☐ Heard of it, but don't know details
☐ Not familiar at all

3. Would you feel comfortable using Martha's Rule if you were worried about a patient's condition?

- ☐ Yes ☐ No
☐ Maybe ☐ Not sure

4. Do you believe Martha's Rule can help improve patient safety?

- ☐ Yes ☐ Maybe
☐ No ☐ Not sure what it does

5. When do you think information about Martha's Rule should be given:

- ☐ During hospital admission
☐ When registering with a GP
☐ Only when needed (during a medical concern)
☐ Anytime / widely available to all
☐ Not necessary

6. Where would you prefer to receive information about Martha's Rule? (*Select all that apply*)

- ☐ NHS website
- ☐ Posters or signs in hospitals
- ☐ Leaflets at GP practices
- ☐ Social media (Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, etc.)
- ☐ TV or radio campaigns
- ☐ Healthwatch Swindon website
- ☐ Other (please specify)

7. Which format would help you understand Martha's Rule best?

- ☐ Short video explanation
- ☐ Infographic or poster
- ☐ Step-by-step written guide
- ☐ In-person explanation from a healthcare worker
- ☐ I'm not sure

8. How likely would you be to read or watch information about Martha's Rule if it were provided to you?

- ☐ Very likely
- ☐ Somewhat likely
- ☐ Not very likely
- ☐ Not at all likely

Q.6 – Where would you prefer to receive information about Martha’s Rule, ‘Other’ responses:

NHS App	GP website	It should be easily accessible and available knowledge; Local Authorities should be promoting this.
Welcome to the ward leaflet	In (hospital) bays on boards	I had not heard of Swindon Healthwatch before today. I don't do 'social media'; rarely read posters; and I don't think of looking for websites. I have just found you on Dr Google.
Public Transport	Letter from GP surgery	Anyone working in a setting where they notice deterioration
Schools and university	You tube	Needs a mix of physical information and online / social media to ensure accessible to everyone
Every means possible should be used to ensure this vital information is common knowledge.	posters at libraries, schools, colleges, etc Supermarket displays	Coming to social groups for people who can't access the internet or have learning disabilities and explaining the process with easy-read literature
Everywhere so everyone is aware	Independent hospitals, private practice and the Armed Forces.	It should be everywhere until it is something that everyone is familiar with and knows about

The public at large are not aware of Martha’s Rule or the implications it brings to hospitals to implement it. Although signed up to it's implementation, it is disgracefully ignored in GREAT WESTERN HOSPITAL.



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