

Pan-Westminster PPG

Notes of 23rd January 2024 meeting

Presentation on Cloud Telephony Solutions:

Aaron and Kunle outlined the benefits and features of cloud telephony solutions for practice and patients. They explained how we are striving towards a single unified cloud-based telephony system across our Central London patch to improve communication efficiency, appointment scheduling and patient interaction.

DISCUSSION AND QUESTIONS:

Attendees engaged in discussion about the implementation of a telephone surge support service pilot, delivered by HCL, the GP Federation, to build on the implementation of a unified cloud telephony.

The patient participants expressed their views on the potential benefits and raised questions about the appropriateness of the pilot/service, security of patient data and ease of use for both staff and patients.

1. **Clear Responsibilities and Accountability:** Patients were not clear who will be delivering the pilot / service; who are HCL GP Federation; What is their role and connection with GP practices?
2. **Call Centres:** Patients were worried that calls will be diverted to call centres outside UK and manned by people unfamiliar with them, history and needs. They would not feel comfortable discussing very sensitive and personal matters with “strangers”.
3. **High Call Volume:** Can the service cope with the demand? GP practices often experience high call volumes, especially during peak hours, which can lead to long wait times for patients trying to get through to the practice. Diverting to another service that may not be able to help would exacerbate frustration and dissatisfaction among patients.
4. **Limited Availability:** The telephone surge support service may have limited availability, particularly during peak opening hours. Patients may find it challenging to access support when they need it, especially for urgent and/or complex matters.
5. **Staffing Issues:** How would the service manage and maintain adequate staffing levels to handle all of the incoming calls from practices? This will be challenging to cover all of the GP

practices with limited resources. Shortages in staffing will make matters worse, lead to increased wait times and decreased quality of service for patients.

6. **Communication Barriers:** Patients with hearing impairments or language barriers may face difficulties communicating effectively over the phone to a new service. This can lead to misunderstandings and challenges in conveying important healthcare information.
7. **Local Culture and Demographics:** How will the service manage all of the different cultures and nuances at various practices? “It is not one size fits all”.
8. **Privacy Concerns:** Discussing sensitive health information over the phone with a new service and unknown people can raise privacy concerns for patients, particularly if they are worried about the confidentiality of their information or the possibility of others overhearing their conversations.
9. **Technical Issues:** Patients expressed concerns how will the telephone support service manage when it encounters technical issues such as dropped calls, poor call quality, or system outages, which can disrupt communication and hinder patients' ability to access support.
10. **Lack of Continuity of Care:** On call divert cases, patients will interact with different staff members each time they call the practice, leading to a lack of continuity of care. This can make it challenging for patients to develop trust and rapport with their healthcare providers.
11. **Miscommunication and Errors:** Communication errors or misunderstandings can occur over the phone, leading to mistakes in appointment scheduling, medication instructions, or other important healthcare information. This can have negative consequences for patient care and safety.
12. **Overreliance on Phone Support:** Relying too heavily on phone support services may neglect other communication channels, such as in-person visits, secure messaging platforms, or telehealth services, which could better meet the needs of certain patients or situations.
13. **Patient Satisfaction:** Overall, the potential problems associated with telephone support services can contribute to decreased patient satisfaction with the GP practice and may impact patients' perceptions of the quality of care they receive.

The meeting acknowledged that this was a useful scoping and engagement exercise to garner the perspectives of patients to inform the design of the service. Based on the feedback and discussions, more work and redesigning will be done to improve the service continually.

Group Exercise

WHAT DO YOU LIKE ABOUT CONTACTING YOUR PRACTICE BY PHONE?

1. **Accessibility:** Patients appreciate the convenience of being able to contact their GP practice easily by phone, especially for urgent matters or when they cannot visit the practice in person.

2. **Immediate Response:** Many patients like that they can get immediate assistance or information by speaking to a receptionist or healthcare professional over the phone without having to wait for an appointment.
3. **Personal Interaction:** Some patients value the opportunity to speak directly with a person, which can provide reassurance and a sense of personalised care, especially when discussing sensitive health issues.
4. **Appointment Booking:** Being able to schedule appointments over the phone is convenient for patients who may not have access to online booking systems or prefer to speak to someone to ensure they get the appointment slot they need and the outcomes they are satisfied with

In queue patient Call Back: Patients find the Call back a better way of queuing which reduces patient frustration. Patients like the queue call back where a flow option is presented to a caller waiting in a queue. After waiting a specified length of time, the caller can choose to receive a call back when their request reaches the top of the queue instead of waiting on the phone.

5. **Familiarity and Knowledge:** Patients like that the practice and receptionists know them and their health needs, so that they don't have to explain themselves each time they call and thus, they can be dealt with quickly and effectively
6. **Patient Prioritisation:** Patients like that practices seem to have a prioritisation and risk stratification in place, whereby they deal with their complex matters speedily and promptly without delay. This is very important to have that confidence and assurance that in crisis situations, they will be dealt with quickly.
7. **Consistency:** Patients like the consistency of dealing with the same receptionists, staff and clinicians at the practice for optimal continuity of care. But patients are happy to talk to any clinician or receptionist for simple straightforward matters.
8. **Trust:** Patients feel because they know who the staff that they are dealing with at the practice, this engenders trust. Patients like knowing that the person knows who they are.
9. **Communication:** Patients find it more reassuring to speak to someone over the phone and feel, sense their response to their enquiry. Some like speaking to people; friendlier and warmer. A patient expressed that "I like getting across what I need, and they have worked out what I need. The end result is more positive and I get immediate feedback on what I've said"

WHAT DO YOU DISLIKE ABOUT CONTACTING YOUR PRACTICE BY PHONE?

1. **Long Wait Times:** Patients expressed frustration with long wait times on hold or difficulty getting through to the practice due to busy phone lines, leading to delays in accessing care or information.

2. **Limited Availability:** Some patients find it inconvenient that GP practices may only be reachable by phone during certain hours, particularly if they work or have other commitments during those times.
3. **Difficulty Communicating:** Patients with hearing impairments or language barriers may struggle to communicate effectively over the phone, leading to misunderstandings or difficulty conveying their healthcare needs.
4. **Lack of Privacy:** Discussing sensitive health information over the phone can be uncomfortable for some patients, especially if they are concerned about privacy or confidentiality.
5. **Long Introductory Messages:** Patients dislike the initial introductory message – “there is nothing that ticks me up more, before selecting the menu!”
6. **Long In-Queue Messages** – Sometimes, there are outdated and irrelevant messages such as covid pandemic, swine flu outbreak etc. These are annoying, heighten frustration and waste time. Perhaps, these messages could come after selecting menu.

WHAT COULD BE DONE TO IMPROVE YOUR EXPERIENCE OF CONTRACTING YOUR PRACTICE BY PHONE?

1. **Consistency** – Having regular staff – Receptionists and Clinicians is important for efficiency.
2. **Reduced Wait Times:** Implementing strategies to reduce wait times on hold, such as increasing staffing levels during peak hours or offering call-back options, can improve patient satisfaction.
3. **Extended Hours:** Providing extended hours for phone consultations or appointment booking, including evenings and weekends, will make it easier for patients to contact the practice around their own schedules.
4. **Alternative Communication Methods:** Offering alternative communication methods, such as secure messaging platforms or video consultations, can accommodate patients who prefer not to communicate by phone or face communication barriers. “PATCHS is a God send”
5. **Improved Accessibility:** Ensuring that phone systems are accessible to patients with disabilities, including hearing-impaired individuals, by offering text-based options or sign language interpretation services.
6. **Training and Support:** Providing training to staff on effective communication techniques and customer service skills can enhance the patient experience and ensure that all patients feel heard and supported when contacting the practice by phone.
7. **Long In-Queue / Irrelevant Messages** – Sometimes, there are outdated messages such as covid pandemic, swine flu outbreak etc. Perhaps, these messages could come after selecting menu. Or, if you want to listen to the latest general message press 1 and so on... Or Press 1 to skip the intro message...