

SPEEDING UP PATIENT ACCESS

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Welcome to the first article from INFORM Sexual Health, looking at the challenges facing modern service delivery in sexual healthcare. This article focuses on speeding up patient access, how services can address some of the challenges of a diverse and multi-lingual population and how through technology you can open up access to your service, while ensuring patient need is matched to your available services.

The Challenges of Patient Access

Healthcare has changed remarkably over the past decade and achieving high quality, consistent, patient centered care is made all the more challenging by financial limitations and the large scale changes to how NHS services are commissioned and provided. To be truly patient centered, services have a range of challenges to overcome; language barriers, disability, and a patient's own preference all increase the complexity of modern healthcare delivery.

Queues for Patients & Pressure for Staff

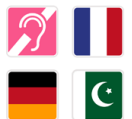
Walk-in clinics are incredibly popular and great for patient access. Although they are convenient, they can also have long wait times for patients at busy clinics and put extra pressure on the clinic administrators and the healthcare professionals delivering care.

The clinic administrators or clerks form such an integral part of running the clinic; both managing the patients and waiting room and supporting the healthcare professionals in delivering care. It is therefore essential to prevent them from getting backlogged and overloaded as this affects not only the patients as they arrive but right through their time in clinic.

Queues at the start of a clinic do not only impact upon walk-in clinics, booked clinic suffer too from the upfront workload of arriving patients, a problem that is often compounded where services utilise the same waiting areas and front desk staff for simultaneous booked and walk-in clinics.

By using available technology, services can improve the efficiency of patient arrival & registration and through appropriate self-service reduce wait times and increase service efficiency. Through patient friendly technology like in-clinic kiosks, it is possible to speed up the patient registration process reducing queues and also reducing the risk of vulnerable patients not waiting for care because a clinic looks too busy.

Language Barriers, Disabilities & Services required



Our multi-cultural society means it is no longer just the services in big cities that face the challenges of non-English speaking patients. Patients have a variety of communication needs, including the need for an interpreter or support due to a disability such as deafness or blindness.

The ability for the service to understand, at the point the patient accesses the service, what their communication needs are, is essential to the provision of efficient healthcare services.

Services need to be able to understand a patient's needs and whether they can address them. Whether those needs can be met here and now, or whether it is more appropriate to care for this patient at a different time and or place.

The main challenge is to understand immediately where and when this patient should be seen to effectively balance patient need and the resource you have available.

This knowledge is essential for Services to prevent wasting patient and staff time by a patient attending a clinic, waiting and then seeing a Healthcare

professional who is unable to address the needs of this patient.

The complexity of matching a patient's true care requirements to the services you are able to offer with the skill mix and competencies of your staff, is a major challenge in delivering cost effective sexual healthcare.

Adding to this are the challenges faced from delivering care at multiple times and venues and the need for additional support such as an interpreter, chaperone or healthcare assistant.

Patient Preference

The popularity of modern technologies such as the internet and mobile phones has revolutionised the way the public access services outside healthcare.

Increasing numbers of patients expect the same levels of accessibility and convenience from healthcare providers. By opening up access to healthcare through technology, services can satisfy these demands and also provide to those patients who are nervous or reluctant to access services, a more discreet manner in which to initiate that contact.

Utilising these technologies can bring real benefits and efficiency savings to healthcare delivery; however it also presents new challenges as well.

In this new competitive environment of service provision, it is essential to strive for continuous improvement to address the financial challenges of service delivery and also to improve the health and well being of our population.

Opening up new ways to access services is key to achieving the improvements in health that sit at the heart of sexual health services. But how do you do this effectively? How can you ensure a patient accessing your service for the first time through the web, receives the same quality of care as if they had walked into clinic? How do you ensure you don't let the most vulnerable patients slip away when they are not yet in the clinic? And how do you match the patient's service & personal needs and their personal preferences against the range of services you offer and the location of the clinics you offer these services from?

Technology for Patients

If you deconstruct each of these challenges and then look at how services can be supported to address them, the resulting partnership of healthcare delivery and technology can have real impact to the care of patients.

Technology hardware and software has a range of tools to support patient access including, patient kiosks, online access and via mobile and landline telephones.

A Patient Kiosk is essentially a secure, user friendly computer. They can be touch screen or have keyboard and trackball in place of a standard mouse. The software, programme or even website that sits on these kiosks can be delivered in a range of languages and offer patients a range of services including; Self Registration, Triage, Appointment booking and Self-Service where appropriate.

Online access enables patients to access services and information from home securely by the web. It again has the ability to offer patients a range of services including; finding where and when they can access clinics, Self Registration, Triage and Appointment booking through a secure website delivered via the public internet and again this can be done in the patient's preferred language.

The standard telephone is also a point of access for patients and you don't have to have someone on the end of the phone at all times to deliver many of the services patient want to access in this way. The telephone can provide the ability to book an appointment and even to pick up test results all in any number of languages.

Through these new points of access to a service as discussed, you can offer patients a range of services including:

- Appointment Booking and Re-scheduling
- Self Registration
- Triage
- Self Service
- Retrieval of Test Results

Supporting patients to keep their appointments is also a great way to control service efficiency and the low cost and effectiveness of text messaging makes it a really useful tool in order to remind patients of their appointments and reduce the number of DNAs.

Messaging in this way does not need to be labour intensive, modern technology has the ability to communicate with patients while taking into consideration; preferred contact preferences and service defined rules on how and when a patient should be contacted. A wide range of messages can automatically be communicated to patients.

Improving Access & Service

Opening up access and providing services in new and diverse ways has immediate benefits to patients, but in order to ensure the real efficiency benefits are realised by you the service, you need to ensure they do not increase the administrative burden on your service.

The only way sexual health services can achieve continuous improvement is to have technology solutions that truly integrate with their methods of service delivery and technology that is flexible enough to support the diverse and changing needs of patients, staff delivering service and those managing the service.

There is the technology available today to support sexual health services in opening up access, delivering service, service analysis and to enable these pressured services to adapt to the environment they are now providing services in. Partnership between healthcare and technology holds the key to the next steps forward in modern sexual healthcare.

Like to know more?

If you would like to find out in more detail about how INFORM can support services in this area please get in touch.

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