

The Surgery Pod™

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What did we start with?

The 2007 contract for general practitioners (GPs) has a focus on quality of health care, rather than items of service. The Quality and Outcomes Framework (QOF)¹ relies on collecting and coding data such as blood pressure, smoking habits and ethnicity, and the use of validated questionnaires such as the PHQ-9² when making a diagnosis of depression. Collecting these data and coding them correctly is a time-consuming process that can detract from making the consultation patient-centred.

What did we want to achieve and how?

As part of Camden Primary Care Trust's (PCT) investment in GP practices, the aim was to use new technologies to improve the patient experience. These have included self-check-in for appointments and a texting service (e.g. for reminders about appointments, asking about smoking habits, etc.). A further initiative is the Surgery Pod™ (Telehealth Solutions Limited, Watford, UK), a freestanding, integrated piece of equipment that enables patients to check their blood pressure and weight and also complete a series of quality-of-life questionnaires. Camden PCT arranged funding for Surgery Pods to be installed in all GP practices in the Borough of Camden, London, UK. The Surgery Pods have a 3-year maintenance contract with the supplying company funded by the PCT. At the end of the 3 years, practices can choose whether they want to fund the Surgery Pod from their own budgets.

How does the new system work?

The Surgery Pod is available in the waiting room during surgery opening hours. Patients log in using their name and date of birth to ensure that they are identified correctly. The screen provides instructions in a number of languages, which can accommodate the international mix of patients living in the Camden area. Patients can check their blood pressure and weight and can choose to complete a range of questionnaires on health-related themes. For example, patients can answer questions about smoking, alcohol and mental well-being. Data from the Surgery Pod are automatically entered into the patient's electronic record and so the information is secure, and can be viewed by health care professionals at a convenient time.

What benefits does the new system offer?

Patient benefits

The Surgery Pod is always available in the waiting room and so it is extremely convenient in terms of access and waiting times. For example, a patient who has been asked to attend for regular blood pressure checks does not need to make a series of nurse appointments. The Surgery Pod contains multi-language information and thus is accessible for patients who might otherwise require the services of an

interpreter. Using the Surgery Pod does not require an appointment and can enable hard-to-reach patients to engage in their own health care. These features can help to reduce health inequality. The Surgery Pod can also search individual patient records, and prompt patients to attend for any screening procedures that are overdue. For example, a patient with diabetes who logs on to the Surgery Pod will be prompted if they need to attend for retinopathy screening. The device can be set to give normal results to patients (e.g. blood pressure within predetermined parameters). Abnormal results are not communicated to patients, however the clinician is informed of any abnormal results by e-mail so they can contact the patient concerned directly for review.

Staff benefits

Much of a typical 10-minute appointment in a GP surgery is taken up with routine observations, particularly for new patient checks, cardiovascular screening and contraception renewals. The advantage of the Surgery Pod is that patients can check these parameters before their appointment, with the information automatically updated and coded correctly in the notes. In addition, the questionnaires contained within the Surgery Pod can provide an opportunity for the patient and doctor to explore other health issues such as smoking, alcohol, obesity and mental well-being. Current data suggest that service users provide more accurate information about their smoking and alcohol use when inputting information into the surgery pod than when consulting with a nurse or doctor.

What next?

The next phase of technology in health planned by Camden PCT is the roll out of the Health Pod™. This is an integrated system with a portable computer that allows GPs to assess a patient's health by plugging whatever device their medical condition requires into the machine. The system includes test strips for blood samples, spirometry and pulse oximetry, as well as blood pressure readings. The portable, touch-screen device then takes readings and assesses the patient's condition and automatically uploads the information into the patient's notes. This can improve the care of people with illnesses such as chronic obstructive pulmonary disease or stroke victims who may have mobility problems thus making attendance at their GP practice difficult. In the long term it is expected that the wider use of 'telemedicine' (i.e. technology that enables clinicians to have rapid access to medical data through telecommunications and information technology) should reduce queues in GP surgeries.

Funding and competing interests

Funding The author receives funding from Camden PCT as Lead Appraiser.

Competing interests None identified.

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