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-9\(^2\) 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\(^3\)
(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\(^4\). 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.

References
1 Department of Health. Quality and Outcomes Framework.
2 Kroenke K, Spitzer RL, Williams JB. The PHQ-9: validity of a
brief depression severity measure. J Gen Intern Med 2001; 16:
606–613.

Visit the Faculty Website at www.fsrh.org