

Thornley House Medical Centre, Hyde

Case study conducted 07 10 10

At Thornley House Medical Centre in Hyde, Dr Amir Hannan has developed an innovative website (www.htmc.co.uk) to act as a first port of call for self care. An ever growing and changing resource that is able to respond to patient needs, the website has the full backing of all practice staff and gradually the message about self care is starting to get through.

Despite a challenging patient population in which the majority are social class 4 and 5, 50% don't have a car and 25% have little or no English, GP at the practice Dr Nadeem Ahmed says that he has noticed a decrease in his workload around minor ailments.

This is the culmination of five years of hard work combining strong doctor / patient relationships with unparalleled patient resources. Five years ago the practice's performance was in the bottom 10% for the PCT, despite having three young enthusiastic doctors. Now it has perfect QOF figures in almost all categories and staff that pride themselves on the quality of care they give.

The practice's website is the brain child of Dr Hannan, who stopped doing out of hours work three years ago to dedicate time to it (much to the annoyance of his wife). Although Dr Hannan managed to get the initial website developed for free, he estimates that up to now it would have cost around £10,000. Dr Hannan is keen to stress that although he supports self care, "self care is not free care" for the provider.

The website addresses some of the challenges put to the practice team by the patient population. Dr Ahmed observes that people who are entitled to free prescriptions will travel to the surgery and wait to see the doctor, even if the prescription is for a simple over the counter medicine like paracetamol. To try to reverse this behaviour, the website informs patients of the actual cost of their visit, from taxi fares to petrol prices, and the cost of Nurofen at the pharmacy or supermarket, which stands at under £3.

Dr Hannan says the website aims to help people separate their needs from their wants and take control of their own health by giving practical advice on self care (as well as budgeting). The "common problems that you can solve" section details resources for minor ailments such as back pain, coughs, colds, headaches, sprains and strains that direct potential patients away from the surgery and to over the counter remedies and websites such as patient.co.uk.

The staff at the practice recognise that it is their responsibility to encourage the website as the first port of call. Dr Hannan believes this is one of the best ways to reach the majority of patients, as despite deprivation, 70% of the practice's patients have access to the internet.

The patient participation group (PPG) has noticed that the doctors are very supportive of patients who want to self care, and that patients are always directed to the website for further information. PPG member Margaret Rickson says the website empowers her as she can look at it and be informed when she is in consultation with a doctor, and Dr Hannan says the website creates a community feel in which patients can support each other as they self care. He goes as far as to say that patients get upset when they move from the practice as they fear they will not receive the same support to self care elsewhere.

To encourage self care in the non-English speaking - mainly Bangladeshi - population who don't use the website, the practice has brought in an interpreter. Connie acts as a triage system, signposting patients to the right service or perhaps just to the blood pressure machine in the waiting room. Before Connie arrived, Bangladeshi patients were using 30-40% of emergency appointments, but through effective communication with patients she has been able to significantly decrease unsuitable use of emergency appointments.

The GPs have bold ideas of where they'd like to see self care go next. Dr Ahmed would like to see more responsibility with the pharmacist, so that children in particular could be registered with a pharmacist and go straight there for their prescriptions. Dr Ahmed thinks that as long as people can get their free prescriptions at the doctor, they will continue to sit and wait. Dr Hannan would like to see a national campaign for self care ("I like to compare self care to smoking cessation"), with support in the community for people who are trying to self care, and a system that flags up to GPs to educate patients about self care every time they walk through the door.

For now though, the GPs will continue with the high standard of care and communication they provide to patients in order to empower them to self care, and of course will carry on encouraging use of the website as the first port of call for minor ailments. Meanwhile, Dr Hannan will ensure the website continues to grow and adapt to respond to every self care need.