

Bromley by Bow Health Centre

Case study conducted 16 09 10

At the Bromley by Bow centre, which is situated in an unexpectedly lush and tranquil setting among the high rise blocks of East London, promotion of self-care threads its way through every aspect of patient care.

Despite many challenges, including the fact that half of patients can't read or write and a third of consultations are conducted in Seleti, the practice has recognised that communication is key to self-care. Sam Everington, one of the GP partners at the practice spearheads many of the initiatives designed to let patients take more responsibility for their health.

In the first instance, the doctor / patient relationship has been redefined to encourage self-care and a sense of personal empowerment. Doctors at the Bromley by Bow centre sit side by side with their patients, rather than sitting separated by a desk, so they can look at the computer screen together if necessary and solve the problem as a team.

This helps to remove the idea that the GP is infallible, encouraging patients to take responsibility for their ailment next time around and have the confidence to self-care. Sam Everington has encouraged doctors at the practice to say "I don't know, but we will solve the problem together".

As a result of this increased level of communication, 50% of patients now leave their consultation with an explanation prescription, which is often a print out from the internet with details of free services or facilities that are available, a number to ring, website to visit, or even homework to do. And they are actively encouraged to try and use these sources the next time around. Sam Everington has found that the explanation prescription has satisfied the patients need to go away with something in their hand, although notes that the same cannot be said for the decidedly less popular exercise prescription.

To support this, Sam Everington created an informative and easy to understand leaflet designed to go in every patient's home. The leaflet gives details of the most appropriate number to ring or person to see in many different situations, which, as well as promoting self-care and responsibility, frees up GP time from unnecessary visits.

Bromley by Bow centre is keen to inform patients about their conditions in order for them to get more out of their consultations. The practice is currently running an initiative to educate children about their asthma, and Sam Everington notes candidly that after attending sessions and noticing changes in his condition one 10 year old boy “approached me and said, ‘Sam, I want you to prescribe me this’”.

The health centre uses its receptionists to their full capacity. Sam Everington points out that although in a good position to communicate with patients, they are generally an “underused resource”. In contrast to this, receptionists at his practice maintain strong relationships with patients, even sending birthday cards and personal notes of condolence to relatives when patients die.

He puts this down to the lack of physical barriers between the patient and the receptionist. The reception desk is long and curved so can be accessed at many points, and although many practices are adopting ever more stringent security policies to keep patients and staff apart, the lack of barriers at Dr Everington’s practice encourages both staff and patients to be friendly and polite to one another, leading to a lasting relationship.

These strong relationships as well as intimate knowledge of patients’ medical histories place receptionists in an ideal place to signpost practice visitors to the most appropriate service, which works to deflect unnecessary visits and minor ailments away from the GPs.

Incorporated within the local community centre, the practice even uses the layout of the building and its surroundings to promote self-care. All parts of the building can be fully accessed by patients and doctors leave their doors open when not in consultation.

Although high unemployment in the area contributes to the significant volume of visits, the practice itself sits within a community centre containing an unemployment office, Sure Start centre and IT suite. This helps deflect some unnecessary visits as well as support the practice’s self-care ethos by helping people take responsibility for other areas of their lives as well as their health.

The practice sees communication as a key enabler for self-care, and this runs through every aspect of the patient experience. The practice uses all the tools at its disposal to encourage self-care, with the result that rather than a bolt on initiative that patients may or may not feel the effects of, patients cannot help but be touched by some aspect of self-care that threads itself through the Bromley by Bow centre.

Using the explanation prescription, GPs can address the underlying fears behind patient visits which often stem from a family history of a particular illness or misunderstanding of symptoms. This directly benefits the practice by cutting down unnecessary repeat visits.