

Northumberland LINK GP Practices Research Report

Introduction

At a South East area LINK meeting, members raised the issue of GP practice appointment times, whether each practice has a Patient Forum and if they are on a public transport bus route for people getting to appointments in the South East area of the county.

Methodology

Research was carried out by sending to all GP practices in the South East area of Northumberland, a covering letter, Northumberland LINK information and a questionnaire to be returned in a stamped addressed envelope. However due to useful information coming in from completed GP questionnaires for the South East area it was decided that questionnaires would also be sent out to the North and West areas covering all the 81 GP practices in Northumberland. Responses of 30 completed questionnaires were collated. A copy of the GP practice questionnaire can be found in Appendix A on page 4.

Findings

The information collated from the questionnaires is outlined in the following sections which take into consideration the main issues raised originally at the South East area LINK meeting.

Appointment times

Findings from completed questionnaires identified that average GP practice appointment times are 10 minutes. Out of the GP practices who responded to the questionnaire, 29% in the South East area and 17% in the North area offer longer appointment times ranging from 12 to 30 minute appointments. However in the West area, the GP practices who responded to the questionnaire offer 10 minute appointments only.

Additional services

Out of the GP practices who responded 73% have websites that provide information on the additional services they provide including practice opening times and an out of hours telephone number. The additional services the GP practices cover include, Well man/Well woman clinics, Chronic disease management, Holiday travel clinics, Smoking cessation, Family planning, Maternity care and Minor surgery.

Transport

In the North area, the GP practices that completed the questionnaire are all on a bus route and the nearest bus stops are approximately less than five minutes walk away and a distance of 200 yards at most. However buses can be limited and are not always regular.

In the South East area, the GP practices who responded are all on a bus route and the nearest bus stops are either outside the practice or at most a 300 yard walk away on the same road where the practice is situated.

In the West area 80% of GP practices are on a bus route but 20% are not. One GP practice highlighted that they are situated on a hill and the bus stop is half a mile away.

Booking the Ambulance service for Patients

From the GP practices' response to the question of whether they book the Ambulance service for patients', the majority answered no as the patient is required to do this themselves. However, if the patient needs assistance to book, this can be provided.

Patient Forums

The findings also show that not all GP practices in Northumberland have Patient Forums in place. Of the GP practices who responded, 17% of practices in the North, 40% in the West and 57% in the South East presently do not have Patient Forums. Patients' Forums provide an opportunity for patients to comment on their local GP practices services.

Conclusions

Longer appointment times are offered mainly in the South East and North areas of the county allowing patients the time to discuss more than one health matter with their GP.

Each GP practice offers various additional services which are outlined on their website or on practice information leaflets.

For both the North and South East areas, the GP practices are on a bus route and at most are a 300 yard walk away from the bus stop. For the West area 20% of the GP practices who responded are not on a bus route.

However as identified by a LINK member and patient from the South East area, if a GP practice has more than one surgery and the patient needs to get from one surgery to another without the use of a car, the public transport bus journey time can range from about 45 minutes to an hour. With small children or for people with limited mobility the public transport journey time can often cause problems. It was also noted that although there may be a bus stop outside the GP practice there is not always a bus stop near patients' homes leaving people to go some distance to their bus stop to use public transport.

Patients book the ambulance service themselves and are provided with numbers to make their own transport arrangements unless they require assistance.

Despite NHS North of Tyne recommending that all GP practices have Patient forums in place by March 2011, not all GP practices in Northumberland do.

Recommendations

All GP practices should offer patients longer appointment times if requested.

All GP practices should have up to date and accessible information on a website and in hard copy, about the services they provide.

When planning bus routes, consideration should be given to accessing GP surgeries.

Patients should be provided with information about alternative methods of transport, for example community transport, taxi vouchers or the Getabout car scheme <http://www.northumberlandlife.org/getaboutnorthnorthumberland/> .

More patients should be made aware of the fact that assistance is available to help with booking the Ambulance service.

All GP surgeries should have a patient forum to allow patients the opportunity to have a say on the running of their surgery. The findings of this research will be forwarded to the Northumberland Clinical Commissioning Group and NHS North of Tyne with a recommendation that all GP practices should provide the opportunity for their patients to have a say in the services being provided at their practice via a forum.

The LINK will make contact with all Patient forums.

Northumberland LINK welcomes the opportunity to work with local GP's to help engage with patients and look at how we can improve services.

