

GP answerphone and website mystery shopping 2015-2016

Healthwatch Waltham Forest
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1. Introduction

1.1. Background

Healthwatch Waltham Forest completed a mystery shopping exercise of Waltham Forest GP practices' answerphones and websites. The research was conducted from December 2015 to September 2016. The research was prompted by the large amount of feedback from the public regarding problems knowing what time they could contact the surgery, the limited availability of appointments, and patients telling us that they are unaware of alternatives when their GP is closed, with many going directly to A&E in these cases. We decided to look into this as there was no best practice guidance locally.

1.2. Purpose

We wanted to know if practice answerphones were correctly advising people how to seek treatment when the surgery was closed. In the follow up survey we were particularly interested to see whether answerphone messages have been adapted to include new information on the local changes in service provision, such as the new Extended GP weekend services. We also wanted to see whether information on Practice Websites were easily accessible. Based on our findings we made recommendations on how information and signposting by local GP practices can be improved.

2. Approach

We referred to a list of GPs supplied by the Waltham Forest Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG) in December 2015 for both the answerphone and the website exercises. The data collection was undertaken by Healthwatch Waltham Forest volunteers and staff.

2.1. Answerphone messages

Our aim was to record the content of practice answerphone messages during times when the practice is closed. We wanted to check if updates are made regularly in the answerphone content, to fit with changes in local service provision.

As most surgeries do not deliver services on Thursday afternoons, we decided that our volunteers should call the surgeries during this time to listen to the answerphone message. The GP Mystery Shoppers listened to each message several times over to record the content. The GP Mystery Shoppers did not have any communication impairments and English was their first language.

All practices were called on Thursday afternoons and the exact transcript of the message was recorded. We carried out this exercise twice, once in December 2015 (Appendix 1) and for a second time in July 2016 (Appendix 2).

In calling practices we considered the entire message, including the length, the completeness of instructions in addition to specific areas:

- Auto-redirect/ re-direct options
- Alternative numbers
- Information about NHS Choices
- Instructions to dial 999
- Instructions to dial 111
- Opening hours information
- Ability to accept messages

These were based on what information patients would need when trying to contact their GP out of hours. The transcripts are available in Appendix 1.

2.2. Websites

Our aim was to evaluate whether practices have an easily accessible website. We wanted to establish if specific information in relation to opening times and how to access the service could be easily located.

The websites were accessed in September 2016. We searched for GP surgeries using their full names. Only the first page of google results was considered when searching for websites. If a surgery did not have a webpage appear on the first page of a google search we considered it to not be available. We assessed the messages for content including:

- Opening hours
- Information on where to get medical support outside of opening hours, including services and phone numbers.
- Information on joining the Patient Participation Group (PPG)
- Availability of online appointment booking and prescriptions
- Options for accessibility needs when accessing websites

The data is available in Appendix 2.

3. What we found: Answerphone messages

3.1. Answerphone changes from December 2015 to July 2016

When comparing the answerphones from December 2015 to July 2016, 8 of the 44 surgeries had changed their answerphone message. One surgery had closed. For 6 surgeries we could not determine this because a staff member had answered the phone on either or one of the calls or on both occasions. In these instances we coded the content of what the reception staff said on the phone. More on this in section 3.2.

| | | Auto-redirect/redirect option | Dial NHS Direct | Dial alternative number | Dial 999 | Dial 111 | Opening hours | More than 100 words | Accepts messages |
|---|------|-------------------------------|-----------------|-------------------------|----------|----------|---------------|---------------------|------------------|
| Dec. 2015 | #/45 | 20 | 6 | 15 | 6 | 28 | 16 | 10 | 3 |
| | % | 44.4% | 13.3% | 33.3% | 13.3% | 62.2% | 35.6% | 22.2% | 6.7% |
| 8/44 answerphone messages had been updated | | | | | | | | | |
| July 2016 | #/44 | 17 | 7 | 15 | 5 | 27 | 21 | 9 | 3 |
| | % | 38.6% | 15.9% | 34.1% | 11.4% | 61.4% | 47.7% | 20.5% | 6.8% |

Table 1: Answer phone content in 45 practices in December 2015 and July 2016.

Table 1 shows that very few changes occurred in the information available. The most notable change was that:

- 5 additional surgeries included their opening times in the answerphone message.
- 2 additional surgeries provided alternative numbers to call. Of these 2, one had added the extended hour GP number 0208 519 3999. This was the only answer phone message which provided information on the extended hours GP hub.

3.2. Key findings from answerphones:

The following analysis of answerphones is based on the answerphone messages recorded in July 2016. They have been analysed thoroughly to identify areas in need of improvement.

Length and format of message:

Nine GP practices used voicemails that were more than 100 words in length. The GP Mystery Shoppers found these messages too lengthy to adequately gather information. The researchers thought these messages would be especially difficult to understand if you have limited English or when under duress due to illness or emergency.

Some surgeries did not state that they are closed, and so it was not clear to the GP Mystery shoppers whether these were answerphone messages or the hold message, especially for those which listed options to press through and speak to reception for specific enquiries.

Seven surgeries' answerphones asked the patient to hold to speak to staff. It was unclear whether the surgery was open, or just one staff member was present, and whether this surgery has a separate answer phone message during closing times which does not ask people to hold.

Three clinics allowed patients to leave a message regarding their concerns or inquiries. The majority of GP surgeries still lack information about opening hours and appropriate times to call back to get their inquiries answered.

Information on the Surgery:

Twenty one practices clearly listed their opening hours in their voicemails. Some surgeries indicated times when the phone line is open, and it was not made clear whether this related to the actual surgery opening times.

Information on Alternative telephone numbers and services:

Extended hour GP

Only 1 surgery provided the Enhanced GP Service number of 0208 519 3999. This service is available at weekends and would be useful to hear on an answerphone out of hours.

111

17 surgeries redirected their calls automatically to an alternative number at the conclusion of their message, or provided dial options for redirection within the practices' after hour service. Ten of these surgeries automatically redirected the calls to "111". Interestingly, all 10 of these voicemails featured exactly the same message. It is unclear how and why these practices acquired a uniform answering service. This message reminds patients that "111" services are not equipped to answer questions specific to their surgery.

999

Only 5 of the practices recommended hanging up and dialling "999". All of the other messages emphasized that dialling "999" is only to be used in the event of a medical emergency.

Those messages that redirected patients to other lines often reminded patients that neither 111 nor 999 are equipped to handle enquiries regarding specific practices. A majority of these practices did not provide any alternative guidance to patients with questions or concerns when their practice is closed.

Automatic redirect / redirect options

The other 7 practices with automatic redirect or redirect options would feature dial options for redirection depending on the patients' concern, or automatic redirection to the practice's after hour answer service.

NHS Direct

Seven practices encouraged callers to call NHS Direct using the number 08454647 in July 2016. The NHS Direct phone line has been closed since March 31 2014.

Alternative phone numbers

Fifteen practices recommended hanging up and dialling an alternative phone number. Phone numbers included 0845 0750494 (9 occasions), and 0330 1004468(5 occasions). Some explained that these were deputising doctors or after hours doctors, while some did not explain what the numbers were. Only one recommended the Extend Hours booking line of 0208 519 3999 when we called in July 2016. The three hubs providing Extended hour GP services at weekends have been open since June 2015.

Other referrals

Other recommendations that were made were:

- To go to A&E (2)
- To look at NHS choices (2),
- To go to The walk in clinic in Oliver Road (1),
- To attend the walk-in at Whipps Cross or North mid hospital (1)
- To go to the weekend Parkside GP Service in Chingford (1).

3.3. When staff answered the phone

At 4 surgeries, the GP Mystery caller was answered by a member of staff when they called in July 2016. Three of these surgeries had answer machine messages in December 2015, whilst one did not. Two receptionists advised the volunteer to access the NHS Choices website, and only one mentioned the "111" service. Two receptionists provided information on the surgery's opening times. One receptionist was very helpful and mentioned that "There is a weekend GP service at Parkside medical centre in Chingford, if your GP practice is closed." One receptionist gave no out of hours information nor advice to ring 111.

4. What we found: websites

The websites were viewed in September 2016.

4.1. Key findings from websites:

Out of 44 practices 27 had their own websites and 17 did not.

Of the 28 practices which had websites:

- All had opening times, general contact details and instructions on how to get repeat prescriptions.
- 26 had information about their patient participation group on the website
- 21 had information on the online appointment booking system on the website.
- 26 had information on how to make a complaint.
- For out of hours information, 25 practices advised to ring 111, 24 practices had information on 999, 15 had information on the enhanced weekend GP services, and 16 practices had other out of hour information, including Oliver Road Polyclinic, Whipps Cross, and other out of hours phone lines.
- Only 6 websites had accessibility options. These included options to enlarge the website's fonts, options for Dyslexia friendly versions of the website, and one website included the NHS 111 number for deaf people. One practice had information on what languages were spoken by practice staff.
- Key issues we noted were the fact that 4 practices still advertised NHS Direct for out of hours. NHS Direct phone line closed on March 31 2014.
- 4 websites mention Oliver Road Polyclinic for out of hours even though the service closed on 30th August 2016.

4.2. Some issues we faced when looking for websites:

Some of the websites were not especially easy to find using Google. This was due to a number of factors, including:

- Confusion between the practice name, practice location (eg in a larger Health Centre of a different name), name of specific GP and name of official registered business.
- Website names based on any one of the above pieces of information.
- Practices being one of two branches located in different areas and the website name being that of the other branch.
- Practices being known by a name not referenced in any way when looking at the address or 'contact us' information on a website. Eg Parkside Medical Centre which on the website is just known as 197 Chingford Mount Road.
- Other practices across the country having the same or a very similar name.

- Website information not coming up in a listing, but a link being available to the website underneath a google maps image locating the practice. (See below)
- Website not being top of google listings.

Where practices were found not to have their own website address a google search usually brought up a variety of directory information sites containing some information on practices. The most notable of these was NHS Choices - these listings were always invariably top of the google results, albeit with a few different entries. This was regardless of whether a practice had its own private website or not.

5. Recommendations

The following recommendations are based on what we heard on the answerphones in July 2016 and based on the websites in September 2016. We acknowledge that publication of this report is 2 months since the mystery calls were undertaken, and that some surgeries may have changed their outgoing message in that time.

1. CCG should issue guidelines for GP Answer machine messages.

Waltham Forest Clinical Commissioning Group (WFCCG) should consider issuing a guidance script to all surgeries with key information that needs to be included in GPs' answer machine messages.

This should include information on:

- '111' and '999', including what their purpose is
- The surgery's opening hours and phone line hours
- Information on the extended hours GP surgeries

Standardised format guidance for answer machine messages would also give structure and avoid answer machine messages being too wordy. We found a number of good standardised messages. WFCCG could investigate who the provider is and whether they can be involved in standardising information across answer phone messages and reducing the cost.

2. All GPs should be regularly updated about local changes.

All GP surgeries should be regularly notified and guided to update their answer machines and websites when changes in local service occur, such as the Extended Hour GP hubs and the closure or walk in centres.

3. GPs should comply with the Accessible Information Standard.

The AIS aims to ensure that people with a disability, impairment or sensory loss have access to easily understandable information and communication in health and social care services. From 31 July 2016 all organisations that provide NHS care or adult social care were legally required to follow the AIS. In order to be Accessible information standard (AIS) compliant, all information from the answer machines should be consistently duplicated on the website and provide AIS friendly options. Good practice examples we found on a number of websites included options to enlarge the website's fonts, options for Dyslexia friendly versions of the website, and one website included the NHS 111 number for deaf people.

Appendices

Appendix 1 - Answerphone message transcripts December 2015 and July 2016

Appendix 2 - Website analysis September 2016