

Access to GP surgeries by the Bangladeshi community in Sunderland



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Introduction

Through local partners within the Sunderland Bangladesh International Centre (SBIC) we heard that people from the Bangladeshi community were struggling to access their GP after some surgeries in Sunderland had switched to using eConsult, an electronic system that allows patients to contact their GP practice online. Some practices in Sunderland are also now using eConsult to triage patients who wish to see a GP, and this was causing stress and anxiety for some people, especially when English is not their first language.

This was followed up by one of our Engagement workers' attendances at two of the SBIC ladies' groups where this issue was explored further and additional feedback and concerns were shared. During the second meeting it became apparent that the group not only were worried about the introduction of the eConsult triage system, but there were other aspects of accessing their GP which were troubling them and they had unanswered questions. Our Engagement Officer suggested that she could invite a Practice Manager from a local practice to their next meeting to allow them to ask questions in a space they consider safe and hopefully, this would put their minds at ease.

On the 14th of May 2024 Paul Weddle, Business Manager at Millfield Medical Centre and two members of the Healthwatch Sunderland team went along to meet the ladies at one of their local venues. Paul was introduced to the group and explained that he could only speak and answer questions on behalf of Millfield Medical Centre, but he would also answer general questions from the group where possible.



The group highlighted the following issues:

- **The use of eConsult as the first point of contact**

The group's main concern was that they thought all patients at some practices now had to access their GP via the online system, and that this was the only option open to them, which could be very difficult for themselves and others in the community where there is a language barrier. Paul first explained why Millfield Medical Group and other practices have switched to the eConsult triage system. He stated that this was to make access to GPs fairer for everyone and would put an end to the early morning rush to the telephone to get in a telephone queue to access an appointment. Although all patients are encouraged to use eConsult where possible, Paul acknowledged that it is not possible for everyone to use online services in this way. He went on to explain that if a patient chooses not to use eConsult or cannot for whatever reason, the reception staff at the surgery will complete, what is called, an eConsult lite form over the phone or in person at the surgery with a patient or their representative. A similar range of questions will be asked as the online form and the receptionist will note down the responses and this will be triaged in the same way as an online eConsult form. All requests to see a GP are then processed and triaged in the same way and GPs can then prioritise which patients need to be seen first based on the urgency of the conditions. Paul also encouraged that patients who think their condition is urgent should highlight this on their form or when speaking to the receptionist and this can be flagged by staff so it is looked at quicker.

One lady shared that if she submits an eConsult and it is an urgent issue, she backs this up with a phone call to practice to highlight its urgency.

Paul added that if people are unsure how to use the eConsult system and would like to be shown, the staff at his surgery can demonstrate to their patients how to use it. He also said that until the send button at the end of the form is submitted, the practice cannot see what someone has written, so they can practice using it.

One lady added that she is a patient at the Forge Surgery, which has been using eConsult for some time now and she thinks it works well and they get to see a GP quicker now.

Telephone systems

One lady shared her experience of choosing the incorrect option on the telephone when she called Millfield Medical Centre as she was unable to understand what the options were. When she got through to the practice the person asked her to call back and press the alternate option.

Paul explained that this would have been correct, as the current telephone system does not allow calls to be transferred but added that this was about to change as the surgery was having a new telephone system installed the following week to the meeting.

Another lady explained that getting text messages from the surgery can be worrying and upsetting for some people from her community, where English isn't their first language.

Paul stated that most phones can now translate into a range of different languages, so many practices use text messages to converse with their patients to enable them to access information in their chosen language.

The ladies in the group agreed that there should be more support from surgeries to support patients with the transition to changes in ways of working, like e-consult.

They also agreed that understanding the processes from the beginning would be of benefit to patients.

- **Use of interpreters in General Practice**

One lady in the group shared that one of her GP appointments was cancelled on 3 occasions as the booked interpreter was not available, which lengthened her waiting time to be seen.

Paul explained that the NHS, and not the individual practices, pay for all interpreters which are used in both primary and secondary care health settings. In GP practices the practice books the interpreter, but sometimes an interpreter who speaks the

required language is not always available at the time of the booked appointment, so this may need to be rearranged, which is out of the hands of the practice.

- **Collecting prescriptions for community pharmacies**

One lady shared that at times she is told by the nurse at the surgery that a prescription is waiting for her at the community pharmacy, but when she arrives at her chosen pharmacy, she is told it is not there.

Paul suggested that this may be due to the pharmacy not frequently refreshing their system to allow for recent prescriptions to come through and that patients can ask the pharmacy staff to refresh their systems on these occasions.

He also stated that individuals can ask for a paper copy of their prescription to take with them to the pharmacy if they prefer this to an electronic version being sent directly there by their clinician.

- **Speaking on behalf of relatives in medical appointments**

Some of the group shared their concerns about GP practices not allowing relatives to speak on behalf of their loved ones, where English is not a first language, when attending appointments at GP practices.

Paul explained that this is to protect the patient, as it is best practice for an interpreter to be booked for these patients.

Some of the group shared further concerns that some interpreters are inadequate and may not always be sharing everything the patient is saying. Paul acknowledges that there is no way for practice staff to know if this is the case.



In conclusion

At the end of the meeting the group shared their appreciation with Paul for his attendance at the meeting. They agreed that their questions had been answered, they felt more at ease with their previous concerns, and they were happy with the outcome of the meeting.

Next steps

Healthwatch Sunderland will be visiting the lady's group again in six months' time (November 2024) to see if their experience of accessing their GP practices have improved.

“ Thank you to Paul Weddle – Practice manager at Millfield Medical Centre for coming along and listening to the concerns of BAME women who are experiencing difficulties accessing primary care due to barriers related to e-consultations and challenges in securing GP appointments as well as delayed prescriptions.

Paul provided valuable guidance on alternative ways for patients at Millfield Medical Centre to get their prescriptions from their GP as well as appointments without relying on e-consultations, which can be difficult due to language barriers and a lack of skills with online services.

This session created an opportunity to address the challenges faced by the BAME community, making the women feel heard. They were satisfied that their opinions would influence primary care and bring about meaningful changes.

Special thanks to Wendy Hadlington and Anna from Healthwatch Sunderland for joining us and offering valuable insights. Their contributions empowered attendees to voice their concerns, and they have agreed to collaborate with other practices to enhance service delivery.”

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