

Patient Awareness and Use of NHS Medical Services: Findings from the Millway Medical Practice in Barnet

Introduction

Healthwatch Barnet was established through the Health and Social Care Act 2012 to give users of health and social care services a powerful voice both locally and nationally. It was established in 2013 and is part of a national network led by Healthwatch England. We listen to peoples’ views about Barnet services, the good and bad. If there are concerns about the quality or safety of services or there are unmet needs, we feedback patient experiences to commissioners and decision-makers in order to improve the service.

There is a range of different NHS services available to people when they are unwell. These cover primary care services such, as pharmacies and GPs, and emergency services such as urgent care centres and emergency mental health services. The major services can be seen in **Table 1** below. Aside from GP and Accident and Emergency (A&E) services, which already have a strong brand, we suggest that much more should be done to increase awareness of the full range of appropriate medical services people can access. This could be done through simple guidelines on what to access and when. Attendances at A&E departments across the United Kingdom have increased by 1.7% every year since 2011¹ and recent NHS estimates reveal that 11% of A&E attendances are discharged without requiring treatment², which could indicate incorrect use.

Table 1: Some of the major NHS medical services and when to access them

NHS Medical Services	When to access
Pharmacy	For advice and treatment of minor ailments and over-the-counter medicines
GP Surgery	For diagnosis, ongoing treatment and advice for ailments and illnesses
NHS 111	Over the phone service for advice on treating non-life threatening medical emergencies
Urgent care & walk-in centre (WIC)	For medical treatment that cannot wait for the GP
999 / Accident & Emergency (A&E)	Life threatening emergencies

¹ The King’s Fund. What’s going on with A&E waiting times? [Internet]. The King’s Fund. 2017 [cited 2017 Dec 14]. Available from: <https://www.kingsfund.org.uk/projects/urgent-emergency-care/urgent-and-emergency-care-mythbusters>

² NHS Digital. Hospital Accident and Emergency Activity, 2016-17 [Internet]. NHS Digital. 2017 [cited 2017 Dec 14]. Available from: <http://digital.nhs.uk/catalogue/PUB30112>

Through looking at the figures of attendances at A&E departments locally, and from talking to local community groups, Healthwatch Barnet was made aware that a number of patients in the Borough do not have a good awareness or understanding of the different options for seeking medical advice when unwell. This prompted a research project, to gauge the awareness and use of different medical services amongst Barnet patients and residents.

Research Aims

This project set out to explore awareness and use of different medical services available in Barnet, amongst residents attending a GP surgery. It was also an opportunity to ask residents how they would like to receive information about local services and to gather initial views on a leaflet that provides comprehensive information of the different medical services in Barnet and when to access them. Three distinct aims were established for this project:

1. To talk to patients at a GP surgery about their awareness and use of the different medical services available.
2. To seek feedback from patients about how they would like to receive information about different services from their GP and NHS.

Methodology

Patient engagement at Millway Medical Practice

To engage with a significant number of patients, Millway Medical Practice was approached as a key location to carry out this project and they expressed an interest in the research. Millway Medical Practice is a large medical practice in Mill Hill, with over 18,000 people on their practice list.

The group decided to undertake two cohorts of engagement sessions with patients at the surgery, using a short questionnaire exploring their understanding and usage of NHS services (see **Appendix 1**). Patients were asked about their awareness and use of: pharmacy services, NHS 111, walk-in centres (WICs) and if they used A&E for non-emergencies. Demographic questions were not included, as gathering information on awareness of the different services and feedback was the priority.

The first engagement sessions were undertaken in March 2017 and then again in November 2017. During the two engagement periods, patients were approached on three different mornings (Monday, Wednesday and Friday) while attending the surgery. This allowed a range of different patient experiences and views to be captured. Healthwatch Barnet volunteers, members of the practice Patient Participation Group (PPG) and Health Champions³ spoke to nearly 200 patients in both March and November. At the engagement sessions in November, a question on preferred ways of receiving updates about local medical services was added to the questionnaire.

³ Health Champions are people who voluntarily give their time to work with the staff in their local GP Practice or surgery to find new ways to improve the services that the practice offers, and to help to meet the health needs of patients and the wider community.

Findings

Overall, we engaged with 390 people across the different dates, 194 in March and 196 in November 2017. The details of their responses are shown in **Appendix 2**.

Awareness of different services

High proportions of the 390 respondents had heard of the range of different NHS services available. 358 people (92%) had heard about WICs and 340 (87%) of those surveyed said they were aware that they could use the pharmacy for advice about minor medical problems. Slightly fewer, 306 (78%), had heard of NHS 111. However, this means that 50 people (13%) who took part in this survey were not aware you could use a pharmacy service for advice and 84 people (22%) were not aware of the NHS 111 service.

Use of different services

Over half of respondents had used a pharmacy (58%) for minor medical problems and just under half, 177 people (45%) had used NHS 111. Three quarters of people had used WICs (75%, 291 people). Most respondents said they would only use A&E for emergencies (not for normal medical advice and treatment), however 43 people (11%) said they *would* go to A&E for non-emergencies. Data gathered in November shows that over half (62%) of those who said they *would* go to A&E for a non-urgent issue were aware of and had used at least two other services.

How people want to receive updates about healthcare services

In November, 137 people provided information on how they would like to receive updates about healthcare services in their local area. Popular means of communication included emails and text messages, which were included in 90 responses (66%). Most respondents suggested a number of channels of communication (for example, *'Email, text, post, social media'*), however smaller numbers of people wanted to receive information by post, phone call or through a poster in the surgery.

Patients were very receptive to receiving information from the practice about service updates and felt it would be helpful to them.

Conclusions

Through the engagement sessions, it emerged that high numbers of people (up to 92%) were aware of pharmacies and WICs. However, patient awareness of NHS 111 was lower (78%). It also emerged that patient awareness of the different services was higher than their use. This could be due to a number of reasons, including that participants have not needed to access the different services or that awareness does not guarantee use.

In addition to low use of NHS 111, some patient feedback about the service was also quite negative. More promotion of the service would be beneficial as it ensures that people are correctly signposted to the best service for their needs. We are pleased to note that a

current campaign promoting the service has just started. A worrying 43 patients (11%) were comfortable using A&E services for non-urgent conditions. It is really important for patients to understand the alternatives available and be encouraged to seek the most appropriate service, or if in doubt and the issue is not life threatening to start with NHS 111. Promotion of services and how to use them appropriately should be a priority.

Patients surveyed were comfortable receiving information and updates from the NHS or their GP practice, through a variety of communication methods. Popular suggestions were email, text message and social media, which are low cost and easy to implement methods and could be used to promote and increase awareness of different NHS services available locally.

Recommendations

Based on the findings from this study, we have created four recommendations, which can be seen below:

- 1. Ensure campaigns/promotions are developed to help the public understand the correct usage of NHS services**
- 2. Improve communication with patients about NHS service changes**
- 3. Develop a range of appropriate and effective communication channels to reach as many patients as possible, such as social media, text messaging, online videos etc.**
- 4. Develop ways of signposting patients to the most appropriate services via, for example, volunteer health champions**

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Healthwatch Barnet are happy to continue working with Millway and other local GP practices to explore different and effective ways of ensuring patients are aware of the options open to them, thus ensuring patients are seen at the most appropriate service.

Appendix 1

This short questionnaire was used to gather patient awareness and use of NHS medical services. In the November 2017 engagements, a question on how patients want to receive updates on local medical services was added to the questionnaire.



Healthwatch Barnet is looking at how widely the residents of Barnet use services other than their own doctor or GP and Hospital A&E.

1. Are you aware that you can go to a pharmacy for medical advice about minor medical problems? Yes/No
2. Have you ever used this service for minor medical problems? Yes/ No
3. Have you heard of NHS 111? Yes/No
4. Have you ever used 111? Yes/No
5. Have you heard of Walk-In Centres? Yes/No
6. Have you ever used a Walk-in Centre? Yes/ No
7. Would you go to A&E for normal medical advice and treatment? – Non emergencies? Yes/No
8. Have you seen this Medical Services Leaflet? (show copy)
9. If yes, have you found it useful?
10. Do you have any suggestions of ways you would find it helpful to get updates about changes to local medical services?

Appendix 2

Table showing the percentage of patient's awareness and use of alternative medical services.

	Pharmacy Advice	NHS 111	Walk-in Centres
Percentage of respondents who were aware of the service.	87%	78%	92%
Percentage of respondents who have used the service.	58%	45%	75%