

Culm Integrated Centre for Health, Cullompton

Case study conducted 21 09 10

At Culm Integrated Centre for Health there is an awareness among all staff that a conventional prescription is not the most appropriate or effective course of action for many patient ailments. As a result, education runs throughout the practice with patients firmly encouraged to take an unprecedented interest in solving their problems for themselves.

Patients can take their own blood pressure and check their height, weight and BMI in reception, and there is even a patient-run library at the practice filled with medical guides and journals for people to learn about their conditions and diagnose themselves. Patients also benefit from evening lectures held every two months about a current health topic. These lectures are often attended by over 50 people.

Key to encouraging patients to self-care is health facilitator Ruth Tucker, who joined the practice two years ago. She has been the mastermind behind patient action groups like Knit and Natter, Amblees (a walking group) and Time Out to Lose Weight, which have targeted some of the most prevalent problems facing the surgery's ageing patient population, namely depression, isolation, inactivity and obesity.

These initiatives, which aim to get patients more involved in the practice, demonstrate a belief in patient participation and empowerment as key to self-care. The practice also recognises that with its ageing patient population, getting people to self-care for their minor ailments as normal will be key to encouraging them to manage their more complicated long term conditions in the future.

Julie Carter, a healthcare assistant (HCA) at the practice remarks that whereas her role was formerly restricted to taking bloods, this is something that some receptionists have now been trained to do, freeing up her time to give advice about wound care, diet and lifestyle.

Mags Pryke, a practice nurse, has seen the roles of HCAs and practice nurses legitimised by the GP triage system, where patients calling the surgery for a same day appointment are directed to the most appropriate person to treat them, which is often not the doctor. Being recommended by the doctor has made patients much more receptive to receiving self-care advice from nurses and HCAs.

To target the underlying psychological problems behind minor ailments like headaches, colds, thrush and acne, two volunteer advice workers at the surgery take referrals from doctors. Vivian Southall, one of the advisers, has found that these minor ailments often have a stress related cause, and so is able to 'cure' the patient through listening and giving advice without need for prescriptions or repeat GP visits.

Patients have also been encouraged in the consultation room to consider alternatives to conventional prescriptions, in a move to try to reverse patient expectations of an automatic green slip. GP partner Dr Michael Dixon was involved in a study in 2007 where for six months every partner at the practice gave patients a choice of herb or prescription for common minor ailments like colds, arthritis, insomnia, depression and fatigue (for example, devils claw for arthritis).

Half the patients involved chose a herbal rather than conventional prescription. Dr Dixon says that this is indicative that patients are receptive to alternatives like explanation prescriptions and self-care advice. The key, he says, is "its about giving something that appeals to their imagination".

A further indicator to Dr Dixon that patients are receptive to alternative solutions is that his referral rate is 46% less than the lowest referring partner in the practice and the practice as a whole prescribes less and uses fewer secondary care resources than others in the area.

With high patient participation and the whole clinical team on board, self-care cannot fail to expand and develop at the practice, with patients taking an active interest in their health.

The centre has turned high levels of unemployment in the area to its advantage, setting up patient participation groups running throughout the day to get people actively engaged in their health.

Healthcare assistants (HCAs) and practice nurses in particular have seen their roles change to encourage self-care.