

Modernising sexual health services

Chelsea and Westminster Hospital NHS FT has made great strides in taking sexual health services online

The NHS Improvement/HFMA *NHS efficiency map* is designed to help NHS provider organisations to deliver their savings plans. One way is by sharing experience and good practice, in this case in managing sexual health services.

Chelsea and Westminster Hospital NHS Foundation Trust became a foundation trust in 2006, and acquired West Middlesex University Hospital NHS Trust in 2015. It provides a wide range of hospital and community services to a population of about one million people. It had 6,000 staff in 2016/17, with total income of £625m.

Chelsea & Westminster is one of the largest providers of sexual health services in England, with about 250,000 appointments a year at its hospital and community sites. Commencing in 2017/18, and working as part of a consortium, the trust will provide a new online sexual health 'eService' for the residents of 27 London boroughs.

London faces particular pressures in sexual health services. The rate of sexually transmitted infections is 65% higher than any other region in England, and demand for services continues to grow, especially in central London.

Local authorities are required to provide open access to services, but the cost of doing this was swallowing up most of the councils' public health

budgets. The councils passed some of this financial pressure on to the NHS trusts providing the services for them. An innovative and lower cost method of delivering services was required.

The project

It is normal now to access many services online. If properly managed, sexual health services might also be provided online, with benefits of rapid access, confidentiality and lower cost.

Despite the potential, the trust knew it did not have the in-house skills and experience to implement a major online service of this sort, especially given the risk to the trust's reputation and finances if anything went seriously wrong with such an innovative and untested service. So the trust formed a consortium with commercial partners with the right experience and put together a bid for the online service.

As a crucial stage in designing the service, more than 3,000 people were consulted through focus groups, waiting room surveys and online



questionnaires. It was clear most would welcome an online solution.

The trust's finance team costed the service models at varying levels of activity, working with clinical and other colleagues. They agreed the pricing mechanism with the other consortium members, to provide a service that was cheaper and better overall but did not risk a financial loss for the trust.

The new service uses online technology to help triage, test, diagnose and sometimes treat sexually transmitted infections. Patients enter their details online and answer questions to ensure they are suitable and there are no safeguarding issues. The technology assesses their symptoms and decides which testing kit to send them. The patients then send their samples to a laboratory for analysis, using a prepaid package.

Once the laboratory has the results, patients are sent a message telling them to log on to the website, which advises them what to do next. Only those

patients needing treatment, or with other concerns, attend a clinic or other treatment, and a recall team checks patients attend follow-up appointments.

Outcomes

The new online service starts in 2017/18. It is expected to improve patient experience, reduce the incidence of STIs and provide a cost-effective and clinically excellent service.

By 2020/21 it is expected 170,000 patients who currently attend a clinic will instead access the online system, with many never needing to visit a clinic. This 30% switch from face-to-face appointments is expected to produce savings of £10m a year within the London health economy.

The trust will make some revenue savings (estimated at £4.2m over nine years) and avoid capital expenditure that would otherwise have been needed for an expanding service. Above all, the trust can provide a good service without constant financial pressure.

The online approach has the potential to be developed more widely in the NHS – for instance, with pain services or chronic conditions. ○

• *Chelsea and Westminster Hospital NHS Foundation Trust was shortlisted in the 2017 HFMA Innovation Award for their work on modernising sexual health services*

KEY CONTACTS

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