Self care for minor ailments

Primary care, and in particular general practice, is a keystone of the healthcare system. Demand on primary care is increasing and this has prompted the Deloitte Centre for Health Solutions, a research centre which encourages and supports innovation in healthcare, to look at the capacity and capability of general practice now and in the future. The report stated that GPs need to work differently to be able to cope effectively with these increasing demands. Demand on GPs’ time is increasing for various reasons including:¹ ²

- People living longer with more years spent in ill health.
- The changing nature and capacity of the general practice workforce.
- Increased public awareness and expectation.
- Increased litigation.
- The significant financial challenges facing the NHS.

Of the various demands on primary care, it is most likely that the aging population will have the greatest impact.¹ An increased life expectancy is generally accompanied by more people experiencing complex health problems, a greater incidence of chronic conditions and therefore a greater demand on GP’s time.

Currently around 20% of a GP’s time and 40% of their total consultations are used for minor ailments and common conditions³ at a cost of on average £2 billion per year to the NHS.³ As GPs need to spend more time treating patients with complex health problems and long term chronic illnesses it is important that people are encouraged and empowered to self care for minor ailments and common conditions with over-the-counter (OTC) medications. By promoting the concept of self care and increasing the awareness that there are alternatives to making GP appointments patients will be more likely to explore self care in the future and reduce unnecessary GP appointments. This will therefore change the culture of dependency on the NHS.² ³ ⁴

Self care is defined by the Department of Health as a part of daily living. It is the care taken by individuals towards their own health and well-being, and includes the care extended to their children, family, friends and others in neighbourhoods and local communities. Self care includes the actions people take for themselves, their children and their families to stay fit and maintain good physical and mental health; meet social and psychological needs; prevent illness or accidents; care for minor ailments and long-term conditions; and maintain health and well-being after an acute illness or discharge from hospital.⁴

Multiple interventions are needed to promote patients to consider self care. This should be encouraged and informed at every appropriate consultation and at every level of the NHS (primary and secondary care) to facilitate a change in behaviour.²

Recommendations

- Use the self care planning tool to support and implement self care projects.
- Use the PrescQIPP resources (adapt for local need) to launch a publicity campaign to raise the awareness of self care to healthcare professionals and the general public.
Recommendations continued

- Engage GPs to develop the skills and knowledge to conduct ‘self care aware’ consultations for patients with self-limiting minor ailments and common conditions. The Royal College of General Practitioners (RCGP) and Proprietary Association of Great Britain (PAGB) have developed an e-learning course to support GPs to do this.²

- Encourage GPs to refer patients with self-limiting minor ailments and common conditions to community pharmacies to purchase over-the-counter treatments.

- Community pharmacists are well placed and already contribute to management of minor ailments and common conditions by promoting over-the-counter medicines. Engage pharmacists to work with GPs to promote self care to patients.²

- Engage secondary care to support self care interventions and refer to community pharmacy if appropriate.

- Encourage and empower patients to be responsible for their own health and well-being. Make patients aware that the GP might not issue a prescription for over-the-counter treatments. Patients do not have to go through the hassle of booking an appointment with their GP and getting a prescription. They can go straight to a pharmacy and receive their treatment straight away.

- Encourage people to keep a small stock of essential medications at home to treat minor ailments and common conditions in a timely manner and avoid unnecessary trips to the surgery or in more severe cases visits to A&E.

  [http://www.prescqipp.info/selfcare](http://www.prescqipp.info/selfcare)

- Ensure that patients are made aware of warning signs or symptoms which would require them to see their GP.

National guidance

Self care has featured in several different national guidance, which are discussed below. The NHS plan, published in 2000, outlined a vision for a patient centred health service. The plan highlights self care as key to modernising the NHS. This supports pharmacists in promoting self care, supports better use of NHS staff’s skills and encourages manufacturers to reclassify more medicines for over-the-counter supply.⁵

A vision for pharmacy in the new NHS was published in 2003 and supports self care by stating that community pharmacists should be an integral part of the NHS by providing community services and being the first port of call for patients.⁶

Our health, our care, our say: a new direction for community services was launched in 2006 with four ambitions. These were to:

- Improve prevention and early intervention.
- Tackle inequalities and improve access to community services.
- Increase support for people with long term needs.
- Increase public choice and influence on public services.

This document was written in response to patients, listening to what they said and what they wanted from local services. They wanted services to be based on an understanding of how they live, how to support them in leading healthier lives, how to help them to live independently. They also wanted local services to be easily accessible and convenient to use.⁷
The Self Care Forum was set up in May 2011 and aims to raise the awareness of self care and embed it into everyday life. The website contains lots of useful resources and information for prescribers and patients (http://www.selfcareforum.org/). A Self Care Week usually takes place in November every year to raise awareness of self care. This coincides with the European Antibiotic Awareness Day which offers advice for patients to self care during the flu season. The European Antibiotic Awareness Day andSelf Care Week are both promoted by Public Health England.³

Putting Patients First – The NHS Business Plan (2014/15 – 2016/17) states that one of the characteristics of a high quality, sustainable NHS is “citizen participation and empowerment” which embodies the principles of self care. The business plan describes several objectives, one of which is “putting patients in control and promoting self care and self-management to enable people to live as independently as possible, with improved quality of life and minimal recourse to formal health services”.⁹

Healthcare professionals also have a duty of care to ensure that patients are aware of when it would be appropriate to see their doctor. They should be counselled on warning signs or symptom which would require them to make an appointment to consult their GP rather than continuing to self care at home.

**Clinical effectiveness**

There is growing evidence to show that supporting self care improves symptom management, general health, quality of life and patient satisfaction.⁴

Additionally, self care impacts on the use of services by decreasing primary care consultations, visits to outpatients, A&E attendances, use of hospital resources and admittance in to secondary care.⁴

10% of patients with minor ailments will go to their doctor and only 1% will seek advice from a community pharmacist.¹⁰ Two thirds of patients seen by a doctor will be given a prescription and only 5% will be recommended an OTC medication.¹⁰ Viral infections and hayfever were the most common minor ailments seen by doctors.¹⁰ Both of these common conditions could be suitable for treatment with over the counter medication. By educating patients about self care and providing support materials, demand on GP's time could be reduced, allowing more time for treating patients with complex health problems and long term chronic illnesses.

The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) also recognise the value of self care for patients with long-term conditions.¹¹ Promotion of self care and better management of long-term conditions by self care results in decreased medical consultations and hospital attendance.¹¹

The current chairman of NICE, Professor David Haslam spoke at Pulse Live 2014, a conference for GPs and practice managers. He stated that thinking more about the effective use of self care and technology could provide doctors with a new way of working to deal with increasing demands.¹²

**Costs**

- 51.4 million GP consultations every year are for minor ailments that could be self-treated at home.¹³
  - This takes up on average one hour a day of GP’s time.
  - On average, a 12 minute consultation with a GP costs £43, so the estimated yearly cost to the NHS is £2 billion.¹⁴
  - Additionally minor illness and injuries account for around 75% of A&E attendances at an average cost of £112 per attendance.
  - Of this 75%, around 15% have the potential to be treated with self care at home.
  - Considering the significant financial challenges facing the NHS it is important to release some of these resources to be re-invested in patient care.³⁴,⁸
Summary

- The introduction of the NHS has improved healthcare and reinforced the importance of primary care prescribers. However this has undermined patients' confidence in their own ability to self care.\textsuperscript{10}

- Demand on GPs time is rising due to various factors including an increasing population, people living longer with more years spent in ill health and a greater awareness and expectations of the general public.

- As GPs need to spend more time treating patients with complex health problems and long term chronic illness it is important that people are encouraged and empowered to self care for minor ailments and common conditions with over-the-counter medications.

References


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Additional PrescQIPP resources