Improving Access to General Practice After-hours Care

Removing cost as a barrier

Our Aim
To improve access after-hours to GP level services in Eastern Bay of Plenty, New Zealand.

Improvements Delivered

- Increased GP clinic hours
- Free access for patients
- An integrated after-hours service
- Seamless access after-hours to GP and hospital held medical records

The Problem
A Disjointed Service

The Eastern Bay of Plenty is a rural area in the North Island of New Zealand with a population approximately 47,000, 48% of whom are Maori. There is a 111 bed hospital in the main town, Whakatane. The hospital has an emergency department, as well as general medical, surgical, paediatric, obstetric, gynaecology and mental health services. General practice services are provided by eleven general practices.

Barriers to access were identified as:
- Opening hours – GP after-hours clinics operated for 1-2 hours on weekends and public holidays.
- Cost – Visits cost $55 during when the clinic was open and $100 outside those times.
- Uncertainty regarding location – The after-hours clinic operated from different GP premises each week depending on which practice was providing the service.

Drivers for change

- Improving access particular for high needs patients.
- Integrated healthcare – providing a seamless service for people based on clinical need.
- Sustainable workforce – by reducing on-call commitments for general practitioners.

The change process

- A series of meetings were held with relevant stakeholders including GPs, and emergency medicine staff. Key principles were agreed.
- The service needed to be provided from existing funding.
- The District Health Board would not charge general practice for use of facilities within Whakatane Hospital.
- Patients would not be charged for any services delivered in DHF facilities.

A Simplified Service

- The new service was developed to address key barriers to access.
- A nurse led telephone triage service was implemented with access via each practice’s own telephone number. All patients are encouraged to “Phone First”.
- The Emergency Department identified that it had capacity to deliver general practice services in the evenings and overnight on both weekdays and weekends.
- The GP after-hours clinic operates from within the Whakatane Hospital Emergency Department.
- GP clinics are run from 10am to 4pm on weekends and public holidays.
- GP services provide telephone advice to nurses working in aged residential care and palliative care nurses working in the community.

Clinical records are kept in Medtech, the practice management system used by all the general practices in EBPoH; and a transfer of care letter is written when a patient is referred to an emergency department.

A community pharmacy is open at the same time to dispense medications.

- During GP clinic hours all patients presenting to the emergency department are triaged to either the GP clinic stream or the emergency department stream.
- There are no patient charges. GP’s are paid an hourly rate from funding that was previously used to subsidise after-hours consultations.

An Opportunity Seized

Discussions regarding a new model of care for delivering general practice after-hours services in the hospital has been ongoing for over 10 years. A number of initiatives had failed over due to disagreements over location, capitalisation of resources and patient payment systems.

Project Whaka was a $84 million redevelopment of Whakatane Hospital which included a new Emergency Department. This provided a fresh opportunity to look at how after-hours care could be delivered from within the new department.

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Revolution and continued evolution

The new GP after-hours service commenced in July 2014. Between 14 and 25 patients are seen in each six-hour after-hours clinic. The average number of patients being seen has steadily increased through reduced variability in the numbers presenting but the number of consultations has only increased 23 patients on four occasions in two years. In the first year of the new service there were 2281 calls to the Homecare Medical after-hours telephone nurse triage service.

Access to Patient Information

GP’s working in the after-hours clinic are given access to both the patient’s hospital health record, and a snap shot of a patient’s GP record. This allows the GP to better assess clinical risk and provide appropriate medical care.

GP’s also have access to community pharmacy dispensing data so they are aware of what medications a person is being given and what treatments may have been tried before.

Growing the service

When launched three practices in Opotiki, another town in the Eastern Bay of Plenty, opted to continue operating their own after-hours clinic. In 2015 two of the three general practices in Opotiki joined the new after-hours model. A nurse led clinical assessment service is provided in Opotiki with clinical support provided by the Whakatane Emergency Department via video or telephone consultation. Nurses use GP developed standing orders to manage common conditions and contact either the GP covering the after-hours clinic or an emergency department doctor for more complex presentations.

What do people say?

Community feedback

- EBPoH initiated a community survey to assess the impact of the new service (n=79).
- 100% of respondents thought GP access was better at weekends.
- 99% were less confused about how to go to find the clinic.
- 97% thought the new model was a good way of providing the service.
- 92% felt that the new service reduced costs for patients.
- 90% believed the clinic was easier to access.
- 83% identified travel remained a barrier to access and costs associated with travel meant that a financial barrier remains for some people.
- Stakeholder feedback (n=28).
- 81% thought the service improved access for patients.
- 79% felt that it was a better use of our resources.

Balancing measures

People will stop using in-hours general practice because of the free service at weekends.

There has been no reduction in demand for general practice appointments during the week.

The Emergency Department will be swamped with patients.

There has not been a significant increase in the numbers of patients presenting to ED outside of the operating hours of the GP after-hours clinic.

It is noted though that the GP after-hours clinic does increase the workload of the ED nurse on triage.

Improvements Delivered

- Cost is a barrier to accessing medical care and when removed people will utilise services.
- Major facility developments present opportunities to redesign services.
- Co-location of different service providers helps to build relationships.
- Integrating medical services can improve access for patients.

Acknowledgements:

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- Dr Jenny Campbell – Senior Medical Officer – Whakatane hospital ED
- Kelly Oriel – Decision Support Analyst – BOPDHB

Source: EBPHA Quarterly Reporting

Pre school children <6 years (Y) 416 900 866 1036 1093 20% 6%

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