

Lights, Camera... Routine Appointments! Engaging patients through video

Southport and Ormskirk Hospital NHS Trust, United Kingdom

What was the challenge?

Prior to COVID-19, patients at the Southport and Ormskirk Hospital NHS Trust receiving therapy as an outpatient would be seen, in-person, by a clinician. However, with the onset of the pandemic, this type of support was restricted as part of coronavirus infection control. The hospital moved to telephone consultations for routine appointments and could not deliver face-to-face 'back to fitness' classes and education sessions. This had a negative impact on patient adherence to care and treatment plans, and thus their wellbeing. Clinicians needed a way to build trust and keep in regular contact with their patients to support them through their outpatient journey.

What was the task?

To meet this challenge, the Southport and Ormskirk Hospital NHS Trust now offers secure video consultations for routine outpatient appointments through the digital platform: 'Attend Anywhere'. Although a small number of video appointments have been offered for some time by some hospital departments, this is the first time the Trust had systematically offered such a model linked to its appointment systems.

What was the action?

The Attend Anywhere platform provides a video clinic environment that can be accessed by a member of the public using a web browser on their own device (e.g. a laptop). On the platform, staff and their patients can have face-to-face conversations in 'real time, with patients being able to show clinicians where they have problems (e.g. a shoulder joint that is sitting forward).

The shift from telephone appointments to Attend Anywhere' was first implemented on a small scale, until the hospital trust was able to obtain iPads and laptops (with support from the Trust's central IT team). Initially the process of video consultations was felt to be 'clunky': patients had to type a link into a web browser, which they struggled with. To overcome this, the Trust's IT team created a hyper link in a patient's email or text message, enabling easier access to the platform.

To prepare patients for their virtual consultations, appointment letters are sent out with advice on what to wear so the clinician can make an effective clinical examination, and contains details how to conduct a

pre-appointment Wi-Fi test to ensure functionality with the Attend Anywhere platform..

Upon its roll-out, some patients advised they would prefer not to use Attend Anywhere as an alternative to telephone consultations. An initial assumption was made that this was due to a lack of technical 'know-how'. However, exploring the evidence of this by surveying patients, it was revealed that their dislike of the platform was caused by seeing themselves on the video. Now patients have the option to turn off their own video during a consultation.

What were the results?

Shifting to 'Attend Anywhere' has been an effective way for Southport and Ormskirk to better support its patients to adhere to outpatient therapy plans.

Unlike phone appointments, virtual consultations enable clinicals to see their patients' faces and body language so can pick up on cues that patients have not understood what has been said, it is unclear, the person is concerned or the wrong impression has been taken from the communication. Moreover, unlike a face-to-face consultation as conducted in the past, being able to undertake an outpatient assessment virtually in a patient's home environment can help reduce anxiety or stress for the person receiving treatment. Relatives and carers can also be included in discussions about a person's care and treatment, as up to four people can participate in an 'Attend Anywhere' consultation unlike telephone or in-person appointments.

'Attend Anywhere' also offers patients a more convenient method of consultation. Under the former model of in-person appointments, patients would typically need to take half a day off work for an appointment; or a full day if assisting a relative with additional care needs.

Moving Forward with 'Attend Anywhere'

All patients are now offered a video consultation first and if they don't want that, then the telephone is used, or a patient is recommended for an in-person appointment. With current modelling, Southport and Ormskirk Hospital NHS Trust plan to undertake only 10-15% of their total weekly outpatient therapy referrals face-to-face, a considerable reduction in physical attendance.