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Guest blog - What makes a successful patient participation group

Derek Spencer, Chair of Gillan House Surgery's patient participation group (PPG), shares how they are successful at raising money and campaigning on the practice's behalf.

About three years ago I wrote a letter of complaint to my surgery's practice manager. To be honest it being the NHS and not really knowing the practice, my expectations of even receiving a reply were low. But when it arrived, the letter from Berrin Buyukarslan was sympathetic, conciliatory, and promised a speedy resolution. I was impressed. And even more so when a few weeks later Berrin introduced herself to me while I was waiting in the surgery's reception. I felt I was being stalked, and I probably was!

Getting involved

It wasn't long before I found myself attending my first patient participation group (PPG) meeting. Immediately I saw that Berrin was overstretched – giving out papers, making refreshments, chairing the meeting etc etc. To my pleasant surprise the lead GP Dr Karthikesalingam, came along to the meeting and it was fascinating to see him in a different context. Until then my only contact with Dr Karthikesalingam had been in his consulting room. Other PPG members included a retired practice manager (from another practice), a retired teacher, and managers of 2 local care homes; clearly they all thought highly enough of our practice to want to join the group.

Three years on I have now relieved Berrin of some of the PPG paperwork. That's where I thought I could make the biggest difference. I also chair meetings – at least on a temporary basis until somebody with more time can do a proper job! Although we have a membership of 19 that figure flatters us, if half that number turn up for meetings then we are doing well.

Practice representation

We have a relatively good spread of ages, and some representation from minority groups, but we need to do more to get all of our members to attend meetings. Our large PPG membership is down to the efforts of Berrin who is always on the lookout for new recruits – particularly anybody who is critical of the practice and has ideas for putting things right!

At our recent CQC inspection the lead inspector asked whether we had ever considered holding a PPG meeting without Dr Karthikesalingam and Berrin. We thought this was a trick question, their attendance at our meetings is crucial. Indeed, I would like to see other GPs and staff at our practice become more involved because the relationship between the practice and PPG is one of partnership. PPG members need to understand how the practice works and what its constraints are, and we cannot do this if we keep the professionals at arm's length.

Raising awareness of practice needs

We have not set out to be a campaigning group, but when Dr Karthikesalingam told us that patients were complaining about long waiting times for hospital physiotherapy appointments we took on our local Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG). In reply we were given an assurance that waiting times would be reduced.

We were less successful with our local council whose plans to build a cycle lane directly outside the surgery will remove car parking spaces on which disabled patients rely. We involved our local MP in this issue and he has now agreed to come to our next PPG meeting if he can slot us in his diary.

We have probably lost the fight over the cycle lane, but we can quiz him about NHS funding!

Raising money for equipment

We were surprised that the NHS does not provide practices with a life-saving defibrillator, so we held a raffle and bought our own. Similarly, we organised a short sponsored walk and we now have two portable hearing induction loops to help those patients who need to wear hearing aids. It's important to note that there is more to these activities than just raising money – it gives PPG members an opportunity to work together towards a common objective and to get to know each other a little better. And we have valued the close involvement of Dr Karthikesalingam, Berrin and other practice staff in our fund-raising efforts with the result that we have got to know them a little better too.

I'm sorry to disappoint but glossy booklets from the National Association for Patient Participation (NAPP) show that we are far from being a model PPG. We have a long way to go. Apart from better attendance at meetings we need to further develop our web-site; increase the number of our Friends and Family Test responses; make arriving and sitting in our reception a better experience for patients; reduce the number of missed appointments; encourage greater use by patients of new technology etc etc. The list may seem daunting but our plan is to take one step at a time, and try to have a bit of fun along the way. And so far this formula seems to have worked.