



Londonwide LMCs

The professional voice of London general practice

Guest blog: Engaged patients boost your practice

This week (w/c 19 June) is patient participation awareness week. East London GP and LMC member Dr Naomi Beer tells us about the benefits of patient engagement and how it helped save her practice.

I want to write about the benefits of patient engagement and the fun we have had.

We started with an appreciation that patients (just like every member of staff) have tons of treasure. By that I mean valuable information about the practice that can help us understand our service: what works, what doesn't work so well and why. Don Berwick's mantra that 'every organisation is perfectly designed to give the outcome it delivers' needs unpacking and patients can help practices do that because they experience all the outcomes. They are worth listening to.

How to get to the treasure? We started by asking staff to invite to a group those patients who either complained or praised some aspect of the service. We felt they were most likely to be motivated to see change. We also made strong efforts to engage patients from under-represented communities that we as a PPG felt were important for example, young mothers, patients with mental health problems and ethnic minorities. We advertised the group on our website, newsletter and waiting room screens. The message was that patients' views were important and we wanted to learn from them to improve the service. As time went on, we also reported back and celebrated the achievements of the group- vital feedback as to its effectiveness and its role.

We do several things to prepare for meetings:

We provide a light lunch and the Chair plus a secretary who takes minutes. In addition, at least one GP plus a practice nurse attend the meeting plus any invited guests. Summaries and agendas with previously agreed items are sent out to an e mail/postal list. A report is given as to the progress of previous actions. Information about services - especially changes, problems or risks- are shared for comment. Patient members' ideas and comments are distilled into agreed action points that are carried forward by named individuals. Agreed minutes are posted on the website. The process is dynamic and on-going.

Obviously every practice is different and the PPG will evolve according to the dynamics of the group. Some practices have been very effective in setting up virtual groups so that certain communities within the practice population who might be more invested in the outcome of a particular issue can be consulted. In this case, simple questions (with yes/no/don't know options) are best.

When we created a forum for exchange of views and ideas we were able to help patients understand things from the practice point of view. We discovered that our patients are incredibly sympathetic and loyal- often the ones who have been loudest to complain! They really want the practice to succeed.

Soon we were fighting for our survival due to the MPIG cuts, the patients quickly understood that we were up for the fight and that we were determined to stay alive for them. They responded by sending messages of support, signing petitions in their thousands, involving their MPs and councillors, getting us air time on local radio and TV, marching on the streets of our borough. Our patient group supported us all the way. Since then, they have assisted in staff training and student education, written articles for our newsletter, helped recruit more patients to the group, been the catalyst for extending health promotion into local schools and providing more self-help information for patients, helped set up groups for patients with particular conditions such as osteoporosis, Parkinson's etc and given us invaluable help with CQC and other regulatory visits. They have been a wonderful source of ideas and support. We call them Critical (spot the double meaning!) Friends.