

*"Patient Partner from Voice Connect has been specifically developed to solve day to day communications problems experienced in General Practice. An elegant, cost effective solution that benefits patients and staff alike"*

# Patient Partner an important step in improving service and choice



Blackwater Medical Centre is located in the town of Maldon in East Essex. The surrounding area is largely rural, including some significant wildlife conservation areas, and also attracts many sailing enthusiasts. The centre itself is one of two surgeries in the town and employs six full time GPs and one part time doctor in addition to a total of 22 staff in a range of clinical and administrative roles. There are over 14,000 residents from the town and surrounding villages on the patient register: the patient demographic is predominantly elderly.

The Partners and Practice Manager at Blackwater Medical Centre were looking for ways to reduce call congestion and make it easier for patients to arrange appointments. They felt that an automated telephone system, in the form of Patient Partner, could help with this common problem. After meeting with personnel from Voice Connect and seeing what Patient Partner could do, they decided to go ahead with the service, installing it in March 2009.

Since this time, Practice Manager Lesley Beale reports that the service has lived up to expectations and is working well at the practice. "We anticipated that Patient Partner would benefit staff by easing pressure on the switchboard, and releasing more time to attend to other essential duties which enhance patient care," she comments. "The general reaction from patients has also been very positive. There were some initial issues with dates of birth for twins, triplets and elderly people born before 1909, but these have all been resolved very quickly by Patient Partner. The system has achieved our objective of improved access by making it easier for our patients to get in touch with us and make appointments, and our patients seem very satisfied with the service. It has also improved the speed with which we are able to handle calls as people are now able to bypass reception and make appointments automatically."

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*Patients of all ages have quickly got the hang of using Patient Partner*

Lesley believes that the service is an important step forward in offering patients improved choice and that, as word of the system continues to spread, that it will play an increased role in further improving call handling efficiency. "We feel that Patient Partner could do more to reduce congestion at peak times, but I think this is purely because the service has not been well advertised by the reception staff as yet – the patients need to know about the system and be encouraged to use it for it to have maximum impact. Hopefully this is now resolving and the system is becoming better known amongst our patients."

Patient Partner's top three features are:

1. Availability to ring at anytime 24/7.
2. Improved patient choice.
3. Patients don't need to speak to receptionists thus freeing up their time.

Lesley is impressed by Patient Partner's functionality and when asked, can't think of any way in which the service could be improved although she mentions that the automatic update function, which updates their clinical system on a monthly basis for a short period of time late in the evening could be inconvenient for any patient wishing to call at that time. This is because Patient Partner requires access to their clinical system and cannot obtain it during these system updates. "Obviously our clinical system has to be updated so there is nothing that can be done about this, but it could be annoying should a patient choose to phone at this particular time."

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This minor, unavoidable technical issue aside, Lesley is very pleased with the system and feels that it does what was promised. "We have found Patient Partner to be an innovative service which gives our patients increased choice. If used correctly, the system can save patients time and money, particularly at the high call volume times which can be problematic for any surgery. It also offers our patients the opportunity of getting appointments quickly and easily. It is no longer necessary for patients to have to ring at 8am and so alleviates the congestion and rush in the mornings."

In fact, Lesley is so impressed with the service, that she would have no hesitation in recommending it to others. "If a surgery like ours was considering switching to Patient Partner I would encourage them to do it as the system does improve patient choice. In a nutshell, I think it's great!"



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