

Cervical Screening Appointment Pathway Survey

GP Questionnaire REPORT & RECOMMENDATIONS

BREIF OVERVIEW

The following Report and Recommendations is for the Transformation of the Cervical Screening Appointment Pathway for Patients with Learning Disabilities and/or Autism in the South West London borough of Wandsworth and has been commissioned by the Wandsworth GP Federation [WGPF].

Introduction

The report reviews the current cervical screening appointment pathways and related processes for patients with learning disabilities (LD) and/or autism, based on survey and questionnaire data from 2 randomly selected Wandsworth GP Federation surgeries.

The survey was created in addition to data obtained from patients with learning disabilities and or autism who've accessed cervical screening in Wandsworth GP surgeries and PCNs.

The goal is to identify areas for improvement to increase accessibility, effectiveness, and patient comfort before, during and after cervical screening appointments, based on information from the GP surgeries.

In particular, this review is focused on transforming the current, cervical screening appointment, system to improve patient access and experience for individuals with learning disabilities and autism.

Key Findings

1. Cervical Screening Appointment Invitations and Communication Methods

- **Invitations Sent via Letter vs. Phone Calls:**

One surgery uses letters to invite patients for cervical screening appointments, while the other uses phone calls. However, letters need to be assessed for accessibility, such as using easy-read formats.

Phone calls, on the other hand, present challenges in communication for patients with learning disabilities.

These challenges include difficulties in processing information, understanding complex instructions, and potential phone anxiety, as highlighted, earlier, during the analysis of returned data.

- **Accessibility of Letters and Emails:**

Only one surgery uses accessible (easy-read) letters.

The importance of accessible communication is of paramount importance for individuals with learning disabilities and autism to fully understand cervical screening invitations and make informed decisions.

- **Appropriateness of Communication:**

Patients with learning disabilities may benefit from multiple forms of communication—such as written instructions, phone calls, and digital reminders—that are tailored to their needs.

2. Booking the Appointment

- **Current Booking Process:**

One surgery integrates the cervical screening booking with the patient's annual learning disability review, which is a process that is familiar and supported by a nurse.

However, the second surgery relies on phone calls, which presents communication barriers, as outlined earlier.

- **Challenges with Phone Calls:**

Communication via phone can be difficult for patients with learning disabilities due to issues such as memory challenges, processing delays, and social anxiety.

Therefore, just calling patient with a lived experience is not enough and a more accessible, multifaceted approach to booking appointments is recommended.

3. Staff Involvement and Familiarity

- **Main Staff Involved:**

Nurses play a central role in facilitating cervical screening appointments, with one surgery emphasizing the use of familiar staff to reduce anxiety and provide comfort to their patients, with a lived experience.

Whilst, the other surgery involves a wider group of staff, including HCAs, GPs, receptionists, and nurses.

- **Training and Familiarity:**

It is essential that all staff involved in the cervical screening appointment process receive specific training on learning disability & autism awareness, along with guidance on working with and assisting patients with a lived experience.

Additionally, maintaining continuity of care by having familiar staff involved, in the process, can reduce stress and improve the overall experience of everyone involved.

4. Explaining the Screening Process

- **Clear Communication:**

In both surgeries, nurses explain the screening process in a way that is tailored to the patient, often using printed resources if necessary.

Support from family members or carers is also encouraged and commonly used.

- **Accessibility of Information:**

However, all printed resources need to be in easy read/accessible formats, and the use of visual aids and clear, simplified language should be encouraged and standard practice.

5. Chaperones and Support During the Appointment

- **Chaperone Availability:**

Although both surgeries offer chaperones, the chaperones offered must be trained in how to assist individuals with learning disabilities and autism.

They should, also, be prepared to offer emotional support and provide assistance with communication as needed.

- **Comfort and Extra Time:**

Patients with learning disabilities and autism benefit from extra time during appointments and the presence of a familiar person.

The availability of calming visual and or audio distractions, such as phones for music or videos, should be considered and encouraged to make patients feel more comfortable.

6. Communication of Results

- **How Results are Communicated:**

One surgery communicates results over the phone, followed by a face-to-face appointment if the results indicate the requirement for a follow up consultation, investigation and or treatment.

However, the second surgery does not have a clear process for communicating results.

- **Improved Communication Methods:**

The communication of results, particularly for abnormal findings, should be done face-to-face, with the assistance of family, carers or support workers.

Furthermore, written summaries in easy-read/accessible formats should also be provided.

7. Challenges and Staff Feedback

- **Challenges in Communication:**

Both surgeries identified communication as a key challenge, especially when it comes to explaining the importance of lifestyle changes and addressing the needs of individuals with a lived experience.

- **Staff Training:**

Inadequate training in communication strategies for patients with learning disabilities and autism is noted as a barrier in one surgery.

Therefore, comprehensive training on understanding, communicating with and assisting patients with a lived experience, along with access to easy read communication resources are essential for addressing these gaps.

8. Patient Comfort and Experience

- **Making Patients Comfortable:**

The focus on providing extra time, allowing familiar support, and offering sensory accommodations is critical.

Both surgeries aim to ensure patients feel comfortable, with one surgery providing extra time during the appointment and the option for patients to engage in calming activities.

- **Personalized Approach:**

Personalizing the appointment based on the patient's preferences is key to making the experience less stressful.

However, this can only be achieved if they are given the platform and means to fully express their needs and choices.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Enhance Communication & Accessibility

- **Implement Easy-Read Letters, as Standard:**

All surgeries should provide cervical screening appointment letters in easy-read formats, ensuring that patients with learning disabilities can fully comprehend the details of the invitation.

To ensure accessibility, images, simple language, and clear instructions must always be incorporated, to ensure full access to information/instructions for patients with a lived experience.

- **Diversify Communication Channels:**

Combining phone calls with other communication methods (e.g., text reminders, emails, and written instructions) could improve understanding and ensure clarity.

- **Training for Staff in Accessible Communication:**

Provisions for ongoing training and support to staff on how to communicate with and assist patients with learning disabilities and autism.

The training should cover learning disability and autism awareness, communication techniques, use of visual aids, easy read resource sign-posting and how to break down complex information.

2. Improve the Appointment Booking Process

- **Integrate Appointments into Regular Reviews:**

Continue to leverage annual learning disability reviews as a platform for booking cervical screening appointments, whilst it's, also, important that nurses remain involved in the process.

- **Offer Multiple Options for Booking:**

In addition to phone calls, offer patients the option of booking through family members, carers, or support workers to help overcome communication barriers.

3. Ensure Consistency in Staff Involvement

- **Familiar Staff Involvement:**

Ensure that patients with learning disabilities are primarily supported by familiar staff throughout the screening process to reduce anxiety and build trust.

In addition, If possible appointments should be arranged in a familiar setting, such as the GP surgery/PCN that they frequent.

- **Chaperone Training:**

It is clear that, chaperones are definitely being utilized and made available, during cervical screening appointments.

However, they should be trained in understanding, communicating with and providing emotional and communication support to patients with a lived experience.

This, in turn will make their involvement in the process more effective and allow patients to feel more at ease during the appointment.

4. Provide Accessible and Clear Explanations

- **Use Clear, Visual Communication:**

Always use accessible resources, including easy-read printed materials and or resources, to explain the cervical screening process.

Also consider incorporating the following to help with understanding;

- **Picture Schedules:** A sequence of pictures that represent the steps in a task, daily routine, or event to help individuals understand what is expected. This is particularly useful for communicating directions.
- **Social Stories:** Short stories that use visuals and simple text to explain social situations, expectations, or specific behaviours.
- **Easy Read Flashcards:** Visual cues that help reinforce important information, such as vocabulary or instructions.

- **Involve Carers and Support Workers:**

Ensure that carers and support workers are actively involved in explaining the cervical screening appointment process and supporting patients, especially if and when complex or sensitive topics are discussed.

5. Enhance Communication of Results

- **Face-to-Face Communication for Abnormal Results:**

Always offer a face-to-face appointment to discuss abnormal results, with the support of carers, support workers and or family members.

Provide easy-read written summaries of the results to reinforce understanding of the importance of the process and treatment.

6. Increase Appointment Comfort and Time

- **Offer Flexible Appointment Lengths:**

Patients with learning disabilities and autism may require longer appointments.

Ensure that appointment times are flexible and designed to accommodate this.

- **Provide Sensory Supports:**

Allow patients to use calming tools like phones, music, or videos during the appointment to reduce anxiety and appointment stress.

7. Review the Use of Accessible Directions

- **Make Directions More Accessible:**

Ensure that directions to the surgery are provided in clear, simple language, possibly supplemented with an easy read map and or visual aids.

8. Ongoing Review and Feedback

- **Regular Feedback from Patients and Carers:**

Establish a process of gathering regular feedback to ensure that the cervical screening pathway continues to meet the needs of patients with learning disabilities and autism.

- **Regular Review of Processes:**

Conduct regular reviews of cervical screening procedures to ensure accessibility improvements are maintained and that the process remains patient-centered.

Patients and healthcare staff involved in the cervical screening appointment and procedure must be consulted.

CONCLUSION

Transforming the cervical screening pathway, by adopting the AIS approach, to better serve individuals with learning disabilities and autism is vital for improving accessibility and patient outcomes.

Implementing the outlined recommendations will ensure that patients feel more supported, informed, and comfortable during their cervical screening experience, ultimately leading to better health outcomes for this vulnerable population.

If implemented, the outlined recommendations will benefit healthcare staff involved in the cervical screening appointment process in several ways, including:

1. Enhanced Communication Accessibility:

- *Easy-Read Letters*: Staff will be able to offer better support to patients with learning disabilities by using simplified, clear, and visually supportive communication, ensuring patients fully understand the invitation and process.
- *Diversified Communication Channels*: By using a variety of communication methods (phone calls, texts, emails, written instructions), healthcare staff can cater to different needs, ensuring all patients are reached and understand the information.
- *Training for Staff in Accessible Communication*: Ongoing training will equip staff with the skills to communicate effectively with patients with learning disabilities and autism, leading to a more inclusive environment and improved patient care.

2. Improved Appointment Booking Process:

- *Integration into Regular Reviews*: Nurses and healthcare staff will have a structured platform (annual learning disability reviews) to book cervical screening appointments, improving efficiency and patient engagement.
- *Multiple Booking Options*: Allowing patients to book appointments supported by family members, carers, or support workers reduces communication barriers, making it easier for healthcare staff to schedule and accommodate patients.

3. Consistency in Staff Involvement:

- Familiar Staff Involvement: Having familiar staff assist patients will reduce patient anxiety, enhance trust, and create a more comfortable environment for staff as well, resulting in smoother appointments.
- Chaperone Training: Well-trained chaperones will provide emotional and communication support, allowing staff to focus on clinical tasks while ensuring patients feel safe and at ease.

4. Clear and Accessible Explanations:

- Visual Communication: Providing accessible resources (picture schedules, social stories, easy-read flashcards) helps staff convey the cervical screening process more effectively, making it easier for patients to understand.
- Involvement of Carers: Carers and support workers will aid in explaining complex aspects of the screening process, ensuring healthcare staff can focus on medical aspects while carers provide additional support.

5. Enhanced Communication of Results:

- Face-to-Face Communication: Offering face-to-face consultations for abnormal results will ensure patients have the support they need and enable healthcare staff to provide clear explanations in person, improving patient understanding.
- Easy-Read Summaries: Written summaries will help staff ensure that patients and their carers fully understand the next steps and the importance of the results.

6. Increased Appointment Comfort and Time:

- Flexible Appointment Lengths: Allowing longer appointment times accommodates patients' needs and enables healthcare staff to provide more thorough, personalized care without feeling rushed.
- Sensory Supports: Offering calming tools during appointments will make it easier for staff to manage patients with sensory sensitivities, helping to reduce anxiety and improve the appointment experience.

7. Accessible Directions:

- *Clear, Simple Directions*: Providing easy-to-follow directions with visual aids will reduce patient confusion and make it easier for patients and staff to manage appointment logistics, improving the overall experience.

8. Ongoing Review and Feedback:

- *Regular Feedback*: Collecting feedback from patients and carers ensures that healthcare staff can continuously improve the cervical screening process to meet patient needs.
- *Process Reviews*: Regular reviews of processes will keep staff aligned with best practices, ensuring the pathway remains accessible, effective, and patient-centered.

Therefore, transforming the current cervical screening appointment pathway using the AIS approach, by implementing the recommendations, outlined in this report, will create a more supportive, efficient, and inclusive cervical screening appointment process, that benefits healthcare staff by streamlining communication, reducing anxiety, improving trust, and enhancing patient outcomes and experiences for individuals with learning disabilities and autism.