Digital First Primary Care

NHS

The Swan Practice online consultations case study

Size: **30,000**

Region: **South**

Geography: **semi-rural**

Supplier: **Sens.ly**

Model: **single handed**

The idea

To implement a more sustainable appointment model to cope with demand.

The problem

For the last two years The Swan practice has been operating a same day appointment model, where patients queue on the phone lines from 8am to speak to a care navigator and secure an appointment. Despite a large team of administrative staff, responding to hundreds of calls every morning, demand was becoming challenging.

> *"We needed to cope better with the demand, we were struggling to break the habit of patients calling at 8am every morning. We needed to provide patients with some sort of interface and get the requests to flow somewhere else. We were having hundreds of calls within the first hour of the day."*
>
> Fiona Walker,
> Operations Manager

The solution

Through the local IT group Fiona became aware of an opportunity to participate in an online consultations pilot with Buckinghamshire CCG. The pilot system, Ask NHS, aligned well with the practice's current care navigation system and gave the practice an opportunity to try a digital approach.

The model: Ask NHS is a downloadable app which centres on a virtual nurse, called Olivia. Olivia can "discuss" health concerns via a chatbot, which is a computer program that simulates human conversation over the internet. Olivia can access appointments at the practice or signpost patients to other appropriate NHS services, such as dentists, opticians and pharmacies. Ask NHS also integrates with EMIS.

Implementation

It took The Swan Practice six months to go from planning the implementation to going live. Having agreed to participate in the pilot, the practice shared this news with the PPG, which consists of approximately 25 active members. Following a presentation, the PPG were very receptive to the idea of using an app, having experienced the frustration of queuing on the phone lines themselves, and so were

enthusiastic that the practice was looking for an alternative approach to improving patient access.

Testing of the system began in September 2018 with the use of test patients. Practice staff and members of the PPG downloaded the app and ran several test scenarios, such as migraine or abdominal pain, to determine how the system responded. The practice was able to successfully complete an online consultation, receive the correct urgency response time, book an appointment which was replicated in EMIS almost immediately and then cancel the same appointment.

Changes were also made to the practice's appointment templates following a clinical review. The review showed the majority of appointment requests were for minor illnesses and did not require a GP's input. Using this data, the practice set up new templates for the clinicians providing Ask NHS appointments. Taking the time to identify the different types of demand and map this to appointments helped to recognise ways to

release GP time. It was one of the key success factors for The Swan Practice, as it ensured an effective use of appointments. This meant patients are offered the correct appointment for their problem and no longer have to queue on the phone during busy periods, which leads to a more positive experience and ultimately, repeat users of the app.

The challenge: When presented with the plan to implement Ask NHS during a protected learning event there was some resistance from staff. Administrative staff were worried that a move to a digital service may have an impact on job security and lead to a reduction in staff numbers. Additionally, concerns were raised that patients would identify loopholes that would permit them to access an appointment sooner than perhaps needed.

Minor Illness Practitioners Appointment Book - version 2

Time	Type	Time	Type
08:30	15 mins same day		
08:45	15 mins same day		
09:00	Externally bookable	09:00	15 mins same day
09:15	15 mins same day	09:15	15 mins same day
09:30	15 mins same day	09:30	15 mins same day
09:45	15 mins same day	09:45	15 mins same day
10:00	Externally bookable	10:00	15 mins same day
10:15	15 mins same day	10:15	15 mins same day
10:30	break	10:30	break
10:45	15 mins same day	10:45	15 mins same day
11:00	15 mins same day	11:00	Externally bookable
11:15	15 mins same day	11:15	15 mins same day
11:30	15 mins same day	11:30	15 mins same day
11:45	15 mins same day	11:45	15 mins same day
12:00	15 mins same day	12:00	15 mins same day
12:15	15 mins same day	12:15	15 mins same day
13:30	Externally bookable	13:30	15 mins same day
13:45	15 mins same day	13:45	15 mins same day
14:00	15 mins same day	14:00	15 mins same day
14:15	15 mins same day	14:15	15 mins same day
14:30	15 mins same day	14:30	15 mins same day
14:45	15 mins same day	14:45	15 mins same day
15:00	15 mins same day	15:00	15 mins same day
15:15	15 mins same day	15:15	15 mins same day
15:30	15 mins same day	15:30	Externally bookable
15:45	15 mins same day	15:45	15 mins same day
16:00	15 mins same day	16:00	15 mins same day
16:15	15 mins same day	16:15	15 mins same day
16:30	15 mins same day	16:30	15 mins same day
16:45	15 mins same day	16:45	15 mins same day
		17:00	15 mins same day
		17:15	Externally bookable

The solution: Communication was the key to overcoming staff's resistance to change. Reassurance was offered that there would be no reduction in staff numbers due to the introduction of online consultations, in fact one of the objectives was to improve upon staff satisfaction. Secondly, it was agreed with staff that rigorous testing of the system would take place before going live to ensure there were no loopholes.

Training: Ahead of going live, Fiona, the operations manager, received training directly from Sense.ly who ensured she was familiar with the functionality of Ask NHS. In addition to this the team received written guidance on how to set up the system which they worked through together as a team. Staff found the booklet useful and effective as they could refer to it at any time.

Following this, Fiona and Dr Stewart, the clinical lead at The Swan Practice, set up an action team which compromised of five care navigation staff and three informatics staff.

The objective of the action team was to share learning, such as the training that Fiona had received, and to engage with staff on the newly developed process map, which detailed the Ask NHS practice flow. This ensured staff felt confident with the change to Ask NHS and were ready to promote the new online system to patients.

> *"It was really important to engage with staff. These are the people that are on the frontline, dealing with patient calls and problems every day, so I really wanted to get their feedback on the process."*
>
> Fiona Walker,
> Operations Manager

Promotion: The Swan Practice took a multi-channel big bang approach to promote Ask NHS. The practice website was updated to signpost people to download the app, which was supported by a social media campaign promoting the app. Promotional material, such as banners, posters and messages for the waiting room screens were also provided by

Daily number of downloads
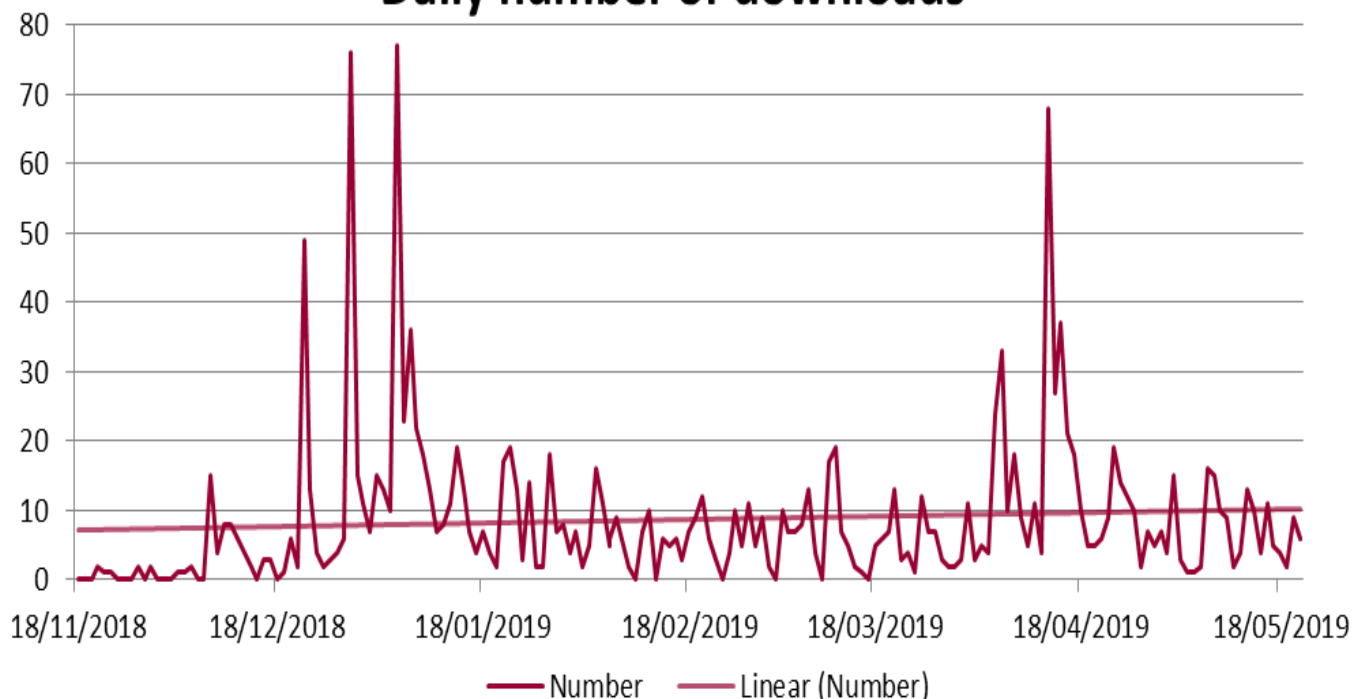
both Sense.ly and Buckinghamshire CCG. The practice also found the use of a text message campaign to be one of the most effective promotional channels.

Practice staff also started to promote the app to patients over the phone, alongside an automated telephone message for when patients where queuing on the phone. For patients who are unable to access the app, they can still contact the practice in the traditional way via the care navigators, or through calling 111, who can also book appointments at the practice.

Staff noted that there was some resistance from patients in the beginning, as they became accustom to the changes within the practice. For a small number of patients, where the care navigators are unable to offer them an appointment, they are directed to the app, which can assess the urgency of their need.

Post-implementation

As part of the commitment to the pilot, the impact of Ask NHS has been closely monitored. An operational review was undertaken after 12 weeks by two GPs who examined the outcome reports to identify usage levels, how accurate and safe the appointments booked were, the transcript of the consultation and what impact the app was having on patient experience.

A clinical review by the CCG also takes place every two months to assess the outcome of the consultations and ensure the app is accurately signposting patients to the correct clinician, or to self-care. This review is made up of GPs, including one who is the clinical safety officer for the CCG.

The April 2019 clinical review found:

- 29 out of 161 consultations were reviewed as routine (could have waited)
- Six out 161 consultations were identified as requiring continuity of care

These meetings have enabled practice staff to identify where further improvements can be made. For example, they found that a better process was needed for when the practice is closed, or over a bank holiday. Additionally,

Booked appointments by month
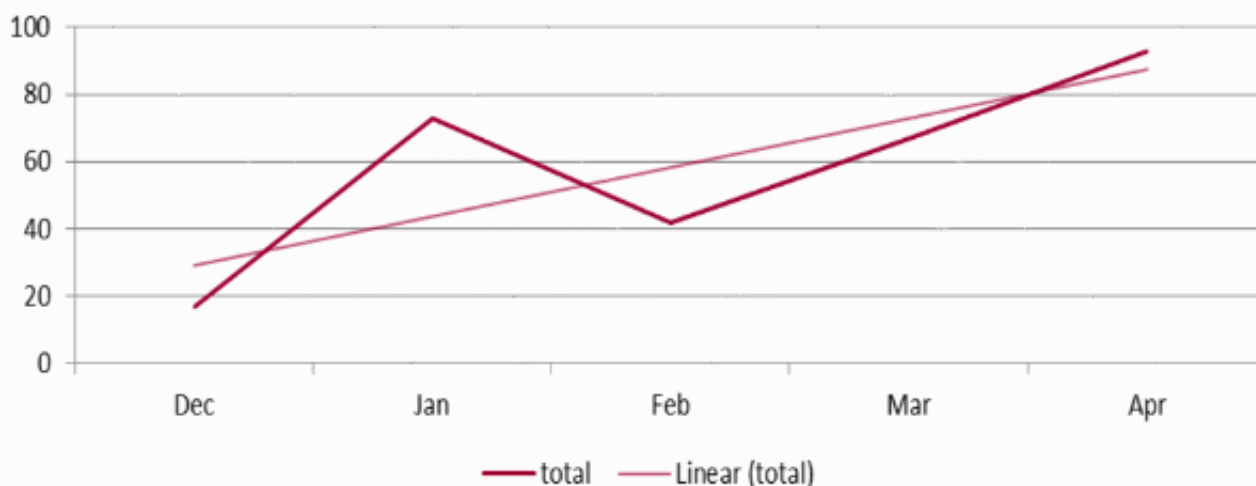
the practice also wants the app to recognise specific groups of patients, such as university students, when booking with the app, to ensure they book in with the GP at the university clinic. Sens.ly are currently developing these features.

System Functionality: Patients need to download the app and enter their name, address and date of birth to access an online consultation, these details are then verified against the NHS SPINE. To complete an online consultation the virtual nurse guides the patient through a series of triage questions, which when completed are given a time disposition, depending on the urgency of care required e.g. appointment required within 12-24 hours. If an appointment is judged as being required by the app's algorithm, this can be booked via the app (and cancelled if no longer required). The notes from the online consultation are then automatically integrated into the patient's records on EMIS.

Impact

The practice has found that Ask NHS has been most effective for young people (over the age of 16) who are becoming more independent in booking their own appointments. Patients who may be embarrassed about their problem are also making better use of the app, since they don't have to discuss their problem with the care navigator over the phone.

The Swan Practice are starting to see an increase in the number of repeat users and are receiving patient feedback.

"I've used it twice since it started up; once it offered me a next-day GP appointment, which I accepted, the other time it offered me advice and self-care information which was very helpful".

"I have found it very good, each time [I have] been offered an appointment when needed".

Want to know more?

If you would like to know more about The Swan Practice's implementation journey please contact Fiona Walker, Operations Manager, fiona.walker12@nhs.net

Usage of App
November 2018 - June 2019

Total number of downloads	1645
Total number of appointments booked	320
Total number of symptom checker uses	900
Average age of patient using Ask NHS	41
Oldest age of patient using Ask NHS	88