Patient Partner ‘easy to use whilst on the go’ says UHS Sheffield

The University of Sheffield is a city centre campus university, formed from three educational institutions in 1905. The popular and well respected university has in excess of 25,000 students and 6,400 staff. Ranked number one in The Times Higher Education Student Experience Survey for 2014-15, student welfare is an important part of the university’s remit. The facility to offer high quality healthcare on campus is a significant factor in ensuring student well-being.

The University Health Service (UHS) is an NHS general practice with approximately 30,000 patients on its list. Most patients are students at the university, or partners and dependants. The practice is open five days a week, with longer opening hours during term time. Serving a student population also means that certain times of the year are busier than others; for example, late September/early October brings a large influx of new student registrations, whilst the summer holidays are likely to be much quieter in terms of demand.

The UHS is located in modern, purpose built premises with 11 GPs and 28 additional members of staff employed on site. Due to the nature of the student population, patient lists are transient and include a much higher than average proportion of under 25s, with the specific health and wellbeing issues this entails.

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The University Heath Centre first installed Patient Partner in 2009 to enhance the online booking service that was already in place. It was hoped that implementing an automated telephone appointment system would help to reduce the number of phone calls, and therefore ease both call congestion and pressure on receptionists.

Gina Down, Reception Manager at UHS explains that the service has been very successful in achieving their aims, saying “Patient Partner has lived up to our expectations and has significantly reduced the volume of calls taken by
reception staff, particularly during peak call times early in the morning when the surgery first opens.”

In fact, at least 20% of appointments are booked using Patient Partner, with the remainder booked via a combination of online appointments, walk-ins and by speaking to a receptionist. In addition, patients also use the system to check, amend or cancel appointments, with over 14,700 appointment actions taking place during 2013. At an estimated 2½ minutes per call, this equates to a staff time saving of over 612 hours per annum.

To access the system, patients just enter their phone number and date of birth; unlike the online system they don’t need to create a special PIN or remember a password.

Gina commends the simplicity and flexibility of the system, and reports that Patient Partner has proven popular with the students. “Our patients really like the system, particularly the fact that they don’t have to wait until the surgery is open to book an appointment; they can do so anytime, whenever suits them.

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They can also cancel or amend an appointment around the clock. From a patient’s point of view, I think it’s easier than the online system as you don’t need a password or to log on to another system. It’s easy to use whilst you are on the go,” she explains. “Our staff also like the system as it has helped to reduce call congestion, releasing time for other important tasks.”

**Patient Partner’s top three features:**

1. Flexibility to book appointments, even when the surgery is closed
2. They can select the GP of their choice
3. No need to log on to another system that requires a password

Gina feels that implementing Patient Partner has resulted in a more efficient use of staff time, reducing stress levels and enabling them to focus on patient-related tasks whilst appointments are taken care of automatically. She believes that patient satisfaction has improved as a result of using the service, making access easier.

Voice Connect staff are also praised for quick responses to any system glitches and for offering a good level of support. Gina concludes “From a practice point of view, Patient Partner is pretty much hassle free – it’s just there working away without the need for additional input, available as another way to book an appointment. If a surgery hasn’t tried the system yet and is thinking about it, my advice would be to go for it.”