A ‘telephone first’ approach to demand management in English general practice: a multimethod evaluation

Jennifer Newbould,1* Sarah Ball,1 Gary Abel,2 Matthew Barclay,3 Tray Brown,3 Jennie Corbett,1 Brett Doble,3 Marc Elliott,4 Josephine Exley,1 Anna Knack,5 Adam Martin,1 Emma Pitchforth,1 Catherine Saunders,3 Edward CF Wilson,3 Eleanor Winpenny,1 Miaoqing Yang1 and Martin Roland3

1Cambridge Centre for Health Services Research, RAND Europe, Cambridge, UK
2University of Exeter Medical School, University of Exeter, Exeter, UK
3Cambridge Centre for Health Services Research, Department of Public Health and Primary Care, University of Cambridge, Cambridge, UK
4RAND Corporation, Santa Monica, CA, USA
5RAND Europe, Cambridge, UK

*Corresponding author newbould@rand.org

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Disclaimer: This report contains transcripts of interviews conducted in the course of the research and contains language that may offend some readers.

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Plain English summary

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Plain English summary

Every one of us wants to be able to visit our family doctor when needed. With so many more patients, this is becoming increasingly difficult. The study looked at a new way to ask for help from one’s doctor to see if this would save overall time and NHS money. Patients were asked to speak first to a general practitioner (GP) or doctor by telephone to see if their problems could be dealt with over the telephone or if they needed to see the doctor in person. Practices using the ‘telephone first’ approach were compared with other practices that were not using it.

In a patient survey, it was shown that just over half of patients found it easier to make appointments with the ‘telephone first’ approach than with the previous system, with nearly one-quarter finding it less easy or the same. It was quicker to make an appointment in those practices using this new way, but, when asked, patients and practice staff had strong views both for and against the new system. Factors affecting patient satisfaction included the ease of getting through to the general practice on the telephone and how easy it was to wait for the callback from the GP (e.g. if the patient was at work).

‘Telephone first’ greatly increased the number of doctor consultations by telephone, with around half of problems managed in this way. This led to more work for practice staff, although there were big differences between practices, with some having much more work and others having much less. There was not much difference in the use of hospital services or in the costs of hospital care.

Although the study showed that, by using the ‘telephone first’ approach, many health problems can be dealt with over the telephone, this will not solve the increasing need for care by our family doctors.

Margaret Johnson, patient and public involvement member
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