Debate & Analysis

The future role of receptionists in primary care

INTRODUCTION

The postmillennial family practice has moved far beyond its cottage industry origins. The broader range of services and treatments on offer in modern primary care are maintained by sophisticated medical technologies and an equally diverse and specialised set of care providers. In addition, the service is relied on to promote health and deal with a wider scope of social and psychological issues in the face of disappearing social care and increasing fragmentation of families. The growing complexity of the primary care environment and the increasing expectations of patients and policymakers are placing huge demands on the primary care workforce. Recent reports on the challenges and opportunities facing primary care in the UK acknowledge that, to meet these demands, we must realise the potential of all members of the primary care team, including both clinical and non-clinical staff.1–3

Arguably the most visible among the primary care workforce are receptionists, required to work under unprecedented levels of pressure and scrutiny, yet without any concurrent change in their training or support. Their position at the point of entry is a complex, technology-supported social process, research has described how the receptionist’s physical isolation at the front desk means that many of their colleagues remain unaware of the complex reality of the various roles they fulfil..."
Some practices are attempting to more overtly embed the role in the primary healthcare service; for example, by renaming them ‘medical receptionists’ and extending responsibilities beyond managing clinical appointment schedules to undertaking clinical tasks such as phlebotomy, which were previously the domain of healthcare assistants or phlebotomists.13 Receptionists frequently live in the locale of their surgery and this local knowledge has been harnessed to offer effective reassurance to patients,5 and drawn on by GPs to inform their decision making.7 Guidance for receptionists is also emerging around triage, and, although countries such as Australia have already produced standards that offer direction on negotiations of urgency and managing patient appointments,14 in the UK initiatives have tended to be confined to recognising patients with specific conditions such as stroke.15

If the skills and experience of receptionists in the UK are to be more formally supported then the recent investment in improving their training is to be applauded. Some £45 million has been made available to practices since the beginning of the year as part of the wider General Practice Development Programme. The initiative is intended to release capacity in general practice by training receptionists for two clearly defined roles.16 The first is as ‘care navigators’, actively signposting patients to the appropriate service and correct person the first time. The second is as ‘clinical assistants’, managing paperwork such as referral letters to free up GP time to spend with patients.

The move towards the increased use of administrative staff as part of primary care teams is not confined to the UK; internationally the use of support staff is growing and their activities can now include reviewing test results, prescribing, supporting prevention and population health, and performing basic therapeutic interventions.17 However, if any extended role of receptionists is to be integrated and sustained in primary care we need more than training programmes for one or two discrete tasks. Instead, the exact parameters of the receptionist’s work need to be better understood, as do the processes and systems within which they operate. This includes the content of the tasks they perform, the equipment and technology they use, and their relationship with colleagues and their community. However, after decades of underestimating their contribution, it may be that the single most important step is educating patients, policymakers, and GPs as to the potential of receptionists to become an integral part of the primary care service that for so long they have been employed to defend.

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