

A Success Story...

VENTURE INTO BETTER ACCESS

Access - Measuring and Shaping Demand and
Communicating Effectively with Patients

Woodville Family Practice - SA

Woodville Family Practice certainly doesn't shy away from a challenge! Driven by an enthusiastic Practice Manager who thrives on change, Woodville Family Practice is committed to continually improving the quality of services that they provide to their patients.

Armed with the desire for a new challenge, Woodville Family Practice decided to focus on the delay that their patients were experiencing when seeing a GP.

The following story outlines the practice's journey through the Access topic, which has resulted in dramatic improvements.



Context

Woodville Family Practice (Woodville) is an established urban practice in the Western suburbs of Adelaide. For a long time this practice has had an all female GP workforce. In January 2006 they hired a male GP, much to the delight of staff and patients.

Currently, the practice has four GPs in total (2.6 FTE) who are supported by one Practice Nurse and allied health staff. The practice provides family medicine, acupuncture, geriatric medicine, women's medicine and they have a massage therapist on site.



Woodville Family Practice

As an established practice, Woodville is truly in the business of family medicine. They service a patient population that cuts across generations, with case notes dating back to the 1940s!

A gradual shift is visible in their patient population, with the older population gradually being replaced by families. The predominant patients seen are women in the 31-40 age range, closely followed by children.

"The critical factor for managing this system is having staff who understand the system. Reception staff are empowered...and importantly staff are regularly kept abreast of changes."

The Situation

Woodville joined the NPCC for Wave 1 of the Collaboratives program. At that time, the practice's Access picture clearly showed that there was a delay in their system. When they took their baseline measures, this delay was confirmed. In particular, the practice had a GP Third Available Appointment of 4.53 days with a Day of Choice survey score of 82%. The Practice Nurse Third Available Appointment was much better at 0.75 days.

Although their GP Third Available Appointment measure confirmed a delay, Woodville's patients were not especially unhappy, nor were the practice staff. In fact, staff commented that this situation was the same in every place they had ever worked; they believed it was simply the way life was in general practice! However, the Practice Manager and Lead GP were not content to stick with the status quo. After attending Learning Workshops they could see the prospect of an improved Access picture, which would lead to a better experience for patients and increased job satisfaction for staff. The Practice Manager, armed with the desire for a new challenge, commenced the practice's venture into Better Access.



L-R: Practice Manager, Marie Kimbar with Dr Liz Lalor . The two were the main drivers of the Program in the practice

The Change

The practice commenced their Access journey in May 2005 and took a systematic approach to the work that they did on this topic. They started measuring their demand and capacity and found that, although the entire practice was overworked, their capacity actually exceeded demand for every day recorded. In fact, demand was only 66% of their total capacity!

The first big hurdle was convincing staff that changes to the appointment system would be beneficial. The figures on demand and capacity were vital for this purpose. The Practice Manager used the figures to prove that the proposed changes were going to be feasible. Practice meetings were held to discuss the proposed changes and reassure staff that the new system would continue to be modified based on their feedback. It didn't take long for the whole practice team to get on board! Together, the practice decided on the date that they would go live with the new appointment system. The big day was set for 1st July.



L-R: Woodville Reception staff and Registered Nurse

Staff were enthusiastic but they soon came upon the next big hurdle, convincing patients of the change. To do this, the practice commenced a patient education campaign. A handout was developed and given to each patient that attended the surgery. This course of action was strategically chosen, as the practice wanted patients to read about the proposed changes whilst they were at the practice. If patients had any questions or concerns, these issues were immediately addressed by the reception staff. This dialogue was essential for reassuring patients that the new appointment system would be valuable.

"The Practice Manager and Lead GP were not content to stick with the status quo."

The Change *continued...*

Information about the new appointment system was reinforced through the practice's newsletter, which featured an article explaining the changes and when they would commence. The practice's rationale for instigating this change was strengthened as they were able to state that similar changes had been successfully implemented in other practices nationally.

The practice has implemented a number of strategies to improve their Access picture, aimed at utilising appointments more effectively and educating patients. These key strategies were:

- Patients ring on the day for a same day appointment. Phones are open at 8:30am to take these bookings. Although the practice has put in another phone line to manage the added traffic, patients are booked in very quickly as staff do not have to spend excessive time negotiating appointment times with the patient
- Pre-bookings are only allowed in the first and last hour of the day. Pre-bookings can be made by doctors and by patients themselves. These times were chosen strategically as pre-booking for the first hour of the day ensures that doctors do not risk starting their day with an empty appointment slot. Pre-booking the last hour of the day was instigated to meet demand by working patients. However, the practice has found that the majority of patients make same-day bookings
- Introduction of a limited time frame for which patients can book appointments in advance.
- The critical factor to managing this system is having staff who understand the system. Reception staff are empowered to apply their judgement to each situation. Importantly, staff are regularly kept abreast of all changes through regular staff meetings

The Outcome

The end result of all the work that Woodville Family Practice has done is an improved access picture for patients and staff. The figures speak for themselves! By July 2005, both the GP and Practice Nurse Third Available Appointment measures were less than one day. Better yet, these figures have been maintained at this level.

However, any new system is not without its challenges. The practice has certainly found that keeping patients abreast of changes to the appointment system has been a challenge. Not every patient has understood the new system or appreciated the need for the change.

Criticism, although rare, impacts the motivation of staff to continue putting in the effort required to make a change. But, the benefits far outweigh these challenges. Nearly every patient can now get in when they want to be seen. The front desk staff spend far less time negotiating with patients, making their day less stressful. Plus, they have the added benefit of not having to cancel a whole day's bookings if a GP is sick! The overall result has been positive, however, it has been hard work to maintain the balance. Overwhelmingly, the best aspect of the system is that, with a bit of tweaking, it has largely sustained itself.

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