

Making the Case for Information:

The evidence for investing in high quality health information for patients and the public



Patient Information Forum

For Professionals Working in Consumer Health Information

A summary briefing for health professionals

Providing health information to patients and their carers leads to better outcomes for patients, reduced costs and a better experience of care.

There are powerful legal, moral, ethical and financial incentives for providing information to enable people to better manage their health and wellbeing and make fully informed decisions about their treatment and care.

The Case for Information is compelling

The provision of health information to patients and the public is now firmly embedded in health policy across the UK.

Providing access to quality health information and support is crucial to unlocking what has been termed the 'blockbuster drug' of patient engagement.

Patient engagement is vital to help people manage their health, make informed decisions about their healthcare and reduce financial pressure on the health service.

Yet information for patients, in most places, remains a 'nice to have' instead of a 'must do'. Whether someone receives information to support their care is currently a lottery. Despite the rhetoric, we are a long way away from truly informed decision-making for all.

The *Case for Information* provides clear evidence about the benefits:

- High quality health information has a positive impact on service utilisation and health costs, patients' experience of healthcare and patients' health behaviour and status.
- There are good business reasons to justify the investment of more time, money and training in health information provision and support. These include positive impacts on service use and costs, substantial capacity savings, and significant returns on investment by increasing self-management of long-term conditions.
- Providing patients with information helps to enhance patients' experience of care. It also helps achieve the other two quality domains - clinical effectiveness and patient safety. This is core business for the NHS and an important motivator for staff. It forms part of the statutory duty to improve quality - both a 'must do' and the right thing to do.

Health professionals have a vital role to play in ensuring that:

- patients routinely receive high quality, relevant and consistent information during consultations and are supported to use it
- information services are commissioned as part of high quality, cost effective and safe care.

Inform, communicate, support

The benefits of information are so powerful that some researchers have developed the concept of 'information therapy' and argue that information can be as important to health as any medicine, test or surgery.

Patients want and need effective communication with consistent messages, so that they are able to make informed choices about their health and care.

To have substantial effects, information first has to be successfully communicated - so that it translates to greater patient knowledge and understanding. This is crucial to achieving patient engagement and behaviour change.

Information needs to be high quality, accurate, evidence-based and developed with users.

Information is best understood as part of a broader communication with health professionals, to supplement their clinical judgment. It needs to be an integral part of consultations.

Research highlights the importance of health professionals and support staff acting as 'infomediaries' for patients - signposting them towards the information and support they need.

Better outcomes

Engaging patients through the provision of high quality health information and support leads to better outcomes for patients through:

- Treatment in line with patient preferences, better adherence to treatment and safer, more effective use of medicines
- Healthier behaviours
- Improved health, quality of life and psychological wellbeing
- Greater health literacy which leads to reduced health inequalities
- Fewer complaints, medical errors and expensive legal challenges.



A better patient experience

Providing high quality and accessible health information also helps to enhance the experience of care through:

- Improved knowledge, understanding and recall of information
- Increased ability to share decision-making
- Greater ability to self-care and self-manage conditions
- More realistic expectations about health outcomes
- Developing a better quality of life - improved psychological wellbeing and less stress
- Making them more satisfied and engaged.

The business case

If we fail to provide patients with the information and support they need, we compromise all three dimensions of quality care - patient experience, patient safety and clinical effectiveness. The NHS suffers through higher costs, lower efficiency and increased claims of negligence.

We can save the NHS billions of pounds by addressing what the Kings Fund has termed 'the silent misdiagnosis' - the failure to fully inform and involve patients in decisions about their care.

As an example, one analysis suggests that if 10% of GP attendances for minor ailments could be avoided through online self-care advice, annual savings would be around £830m. Better health information can also help to reduce pressures on A&E departments, emergency admissions and the length of hospital stays.

Failures in patient-doctor communications result in higher levels of complaint and increased claims of negligence.

At a challenging time for the NHS, it is therefore a financial, clinical and moral imperative to support patients with better information. To do any less will continue to compromise quality and waste scarce public resources.

The health professional role

- 1 Provide high quality information routinely during consultations, particularly for those managing a long term condition. Record what information is given and monitor its effectiveness.
- 2 Assess the information needs of patients and carers; check their level of health literacy and understanding.
- 3 Champion high quality health information, raise awareness of its importance and call for it to be properly commissioned and resourced.



The Patient Information Forum (PiF) is the organisation for people working in consumer health information. PiF is a UK wide, not-for-profit, independent organisation with members in all healthcare sectors.

We commissioned Grant Riches Communication Consultants (www.grantriches.co.uk) to identify evidence on the benefits of providing, and the harms of not providing, high quality consumer health information.

The research was funded by the Department of Health's Innovation, Excellence and Strategic Development Fund and Macmillan Cancer Support (www.macmillan.org.uk).

This briefing is aimed at health professionals. You can read a more detailed executive summary and the full research report at www.pifonline.org.uk.

Patient Information Forum
500 Chiswick High Road, London W4 5RG
Email: admin@pifonline.org.uk