

Project launched to prevent digital exclusion for people with cancer

Creating a fit-for-purpose digital NHS has long been a priority for local and national leaders, yet ambitious Government targets – such as achieving a ‘paperless NHS’ by 2018 - have successively been missed.

The rate of digital transformation within the healthcare system has previously been criticised for being too slow, leading to concerns that opportunities to create a more efficient and accessible service are being missed.

However, an unexpected outcome of the coronavirus pandemic has been a drastic acceleration of digital adoption within the NHS.

This is especially notable in primary care, where an estimated 85% of GP appointments have occurred remotely via video platforms such as Zoom and Skype, compared with just 5% before the pandemic.

Although this is undoubtedly a positive step for local services, it is acknowledged that not everyone can easily access digital treatment. The fear of being ‘left behind’ by digital transformation is a real concern, especially among elderly people, people with disabilities and people with language barriers.

To make sure patient groups at risk of digital exclusion are not overlooked by new developments, Healthwatch Norfolk have launched a project which aims to capture patient experience, focussing initially on people affected by cancer.

The organisation is exploring patients’ perception and experiences of virtual consultations via a public survey, which can be completed online or by contacting Healthwatch Norfolk directly by phone or email.

The survey will attempt to understand:

- Whether people with cancer have had a virtual consultation
- Whether the consultation met their needs
- Their overall experience
- Which individuals or communities are being digitally excluded
- Potential improvements that could be made to enable digital access to primary and secondary cancer care consultations
- Respondents’ experience of signposting to “Digital Havens”

Through this piece of targeted engagement, HWN aim to raise public awareness of the support services available to them as well as facilitate work with service providers to enable better engagement with people with additional needs.

Regarding the launch of the project, Alex Stewart, Healthwatch Norfolk CEO commented: “We have seen more transformation of health and care services in the last few months than we have seen in over four decades of integrated health and social care policy initiatives.

“Covid-19 has driven some fantastic examples of joined-up working across the NHS and local government, with herculean efforts and rapid innovations deployed at pace to rapidly safeguard patients and support staff.

“However, the backlog of demand for cancer treatment created by COVID-19 means it is vital that digital support is employed effectively to support the delivery of life-saving care.

“Healthwatch Norfolk consider that there is a real need to evaluate the digital experiences of people affected by cancer, so that commissioners and service providers can create a truly equitable digital offer for everyone.”

If you would like to participate, please contact Healthwatch Norfolk by calling 01953 856029, or emailing enquiries@healthwatchnorfolk.co.uk. Alternatively, the survey can be completed online by visiting

Patients: www.smartsurvey.co.uk/s/cancerappointments/

Staff: www.smartsurvey.co.uk/s/cancerdigitalexclusion/

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