GP Experiences:

Mental health information on Lambeth GP websites

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Introduction

In 2013 Healthwatch Lambeth identified mental health as one of its priority areas of work. Following on from our Vassall report (Healthwatch, 2015) which indicated that eight in ten people would approach their GP about mental health concerns before anyone else, we wanted to look at what the experience of approaching a Lambeth GP was like. One aspect of this was to look at the websites of GP surgeries to find out what information and signposting was available for patients online.

Websites are an important method of communication between surgeries and patients, and have the capacity to speak to patients often before they have even made a face to face appointment. If utilised well, this can alleviate both the pressure on GPs and create quicker access to treatment for the public. For instance, if patients self-refer to counselling services at the point of contacting the surgery (or their website), rather than waiting for the GP to explain self-referral routes, their wait for treatment will be shortened. However, this depends on websites presenting information in an accessible and reassuring way.

Methods

Between September and October 2016, our mental health engagement officer reviewed all 48 Lambeth GP websites to see what specific mental health information they contained, spanning: mental wellbeing, symptoms, specific diagnoses, signposting to treatments and self-care. Additionally, the audit looked at whether information and signposting was easy to find on the website, and how appropriate the language and the messages behind it were.
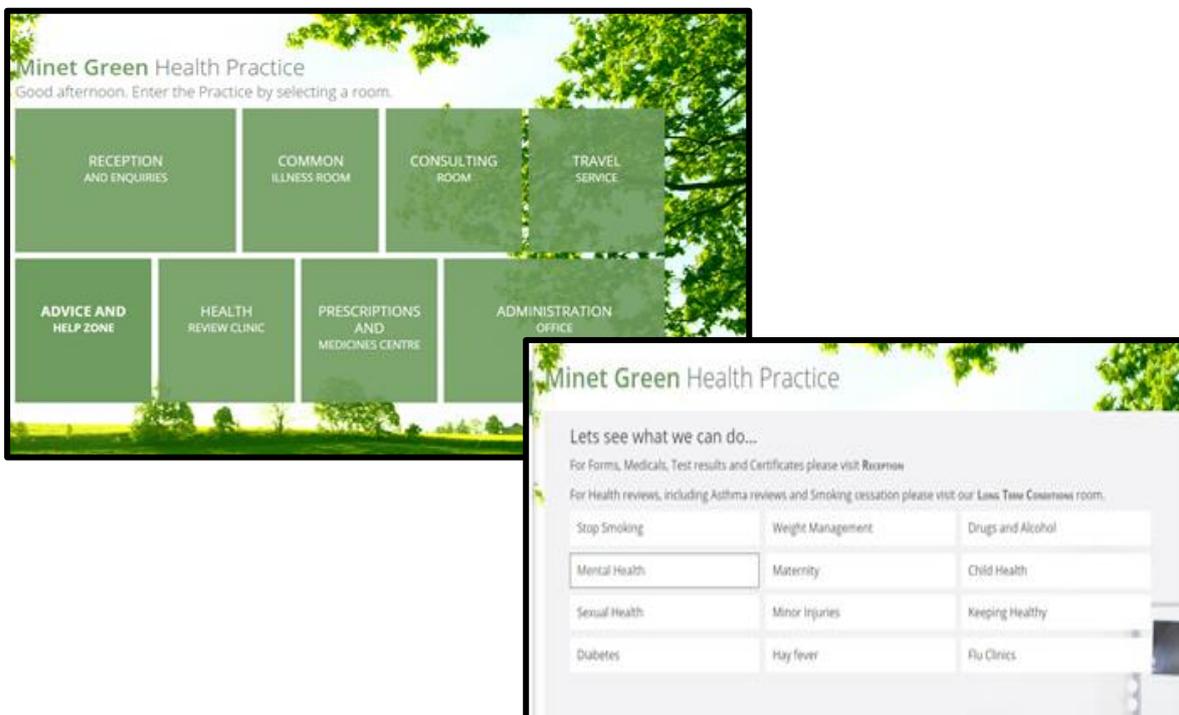
Limitations

All Lambeth GP websites were looked at twice across September and October, 2016. In between those months, three websites had changed to include additional information on mental health (accounted for in our findings). Of course, other websites may have changed since then. Comments on style and impression are subjective and our recommendations are based on what we think ought to be included on GPs websites, as there are no current guidelines provided.

Findings

a. Can I find information easily?

- We found mental health information on 47 of 48 Lambeth GP websites, though the content varied widely in terms of quality and quantity. One website did not refer in any capacity to mental health.

- 26 websites included actual information beyond signposting to clinical or information services.

- Roughly a quarter (13) of the websites reviewed were found to include information in areas that we felt to be 'easy to find'. Positive examples of this included where mental health information was found under tabs labelled: my health, health information, advice and help, or a Health A-Z. For instance, the homepage for this practice included an 'advice and health zone', which then led through to different topics, including mental health.

- A third (17) of the websites we looked at provided mental health information under a tab labelled 'long term conditions', which was often written in a small font and placed low down on the homepage, making it hard to locate. We question whether this is an appropriate categorisation for mental health information partly because not all mental

health conditions are 'long-term' but also because the content becomes difficult to find for those who are undiagnosed but are seeking help. However, four of these also included mental health information in other areas.

- Three websites which contained 'useful information' tabs with links to different health topics from asthma to foot health, and very helpful signposting to local services, and yet included no information about mental health under this heading. One had to click on self-care on the main homepage, and then onto self-referrals.

- Although one of the websites seemed to have their information placed under easy to find tabs, these unfortunately were not working when we accessed the website on two different occasions and loaded with an 'error on page' message each time.

b. Is there any information available about my specific concerns?

Just over half (26) of GP websites **included actual information[1]** about mental wellbeing and nine of the 48 GP surgery websites we visited included diagnosis-specific information as part of their websites, although this all varied in terms of quantity and quality (some websites only included information on a couple of diagnoses, for instance, whilst others included a comprehensive mental health A-Z).

Features we liked…

Use of accessible tools: Seven websites included either a **health A-Z or a mental health A-Z** within their homepage, which included information on specific mental health diagnoses and symptoms such as low mood, depression or personality disorder. Two websites included as part of their websites the NHS health A-Z. These A-Zs were felt to be highly useful and provided comprehensive information on diagnoses, symptoms, treatments and ways of supporting oneself. However, two A-Zs only provided information on diagnoses, not symptoms.

Signposting to external sources of information: While 38 websites did not contain any diagnosis specific information, some made good use of linking to external sources of information which we felt was useful and sufficient for those seeking more detailed information. For instance, including a link to the NHS Health A-Z, the Mental Health Foundation, NHS Choices, Mind or Rethink Mental Illness. Two provided links to detailed articles about mental health.

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[1] 'Actual information' refers to information beyond signposting or hyperlinking to other services or sources of information

Language: This varied between websites as some appeared to make a more **concerted effort to use more welcoming and encouraging language** around mental health. Examples of 'person centred' language included easy to understand explanations of the purpose and structure of counselling; information around the commonality of mental health conditions and the daily living factors which can contribute towards them, and information which was clearly structured into relevant subheadings and links. For instance, one website had written:

'recognising that you may have a mental health problem and taking the first steps to get help can be difficult. We're here to help. We understand that the Telephone Access System may not be ideal to discuss your problems in depth. Please contact us, and we will try to arrange time to talk to you that's convenient, and help you move forward'.

Another had used language which **normalised the experience** of mental health problems and seemed to address common stigma, writing, for instance, *'it's easy to think that mental health issues don't concern us, but in fact a quarter of us will have problems with our mental wellbeing at some points in our lives'.*

Help-seeking advice: For example, two websites provided in-depth information on anxiety, depression, low mood and panic attacks which was presented under accessible headings of 'I want to help myself'; 'I want pharmacy advice'; 'I want advice from a 111 clinician' and 'I want treatment and advice from my GP'. However, websites did not reference any of the more severe mental illnesses, such as schizophrenia or personality disorder, let alone provide in-depth information on them. Three sites also explained common interventions, for instance, what 'counselling' or 'CBT (Cognitive Behavioural Therapy)' involves. Demystifying services this way could be helpful for people who have not accessed a mental health service before or those who may be in distress or crisis when they are at the point of wanting to contact the GP.

c. Features we would change…

Lack of information: 21 of all Lambeth GP websites did not provide any specific information (see previous footnote) on mental health. Furthermore, four websites **neither provided specific information within their website nor referred to external sources** of mental health information (although they signposted to sources of clinical support). One website appeared to include mental health information but the tabs were not working when we accessed the website in October nor again a few weeks later.

Placing mental health information under a 'long term conditions' tab: Commonly, websites nested mental health information under a 'long term conditions' tab, which included a couple of sentences explaining how common mental health problems are and gave a few examples of mental illnesses and who they 'typically' afflict; e.g. 'eating disorders are more common in young people'. Under this tab there were often also hyperlinks to external websites, including: Mental Health Foundation, Alzheimer's Society, a BUPA page on depression and Health Talk Online. We felt that the information available under this heading was of a limited nature as it only referred to a few diagnoses, and was restricted predominantly to these longer-term conditions. Under long term conditions, we found no information on severe mental illnesses such as personality disorder or schizophrenia, or milder mental health concerns such as anxiety.

Appropriate messaging: One website provided an introductory paragraph on mental health which included a focus on **the cost of mental illness** to individual and society. Although the paragraph stressed the prevalence of mental health across all ages, genders and ethnicities, it did not provide information in a person-centred way, nor did it provide information about specific concerns.

Include information about mental health relating to children and young people, and for family members and carers: We did not find any specific information relating to children or young people, or for family members worried about their loved ones' mental health.

d. Can I find out how to access treatment or support from the GP?

Although nearly two-thirds (31) of the websites gave details of how the GP surgery could help individuals access support, only 11 of these explained in depth that individuals could speak to the GP and that it would then be possible to make onward referrals. A third (16) of surgeries did not give any advice or information about speaking to the GP about accessing clinical support with mental health concerns.

On discussing GP provision of counselling services with NHS Lambeth commissioners in October 2016, we were informed that no GP services provided in-house counsellors whom they could refer directly into. However, nine websites implied in some capacity that they did have in-house counsellors who could be seen, with statements such as: 'there is a clinical psychologist available at the surgery'; 'we have an excellent counselling service'; and 'we have a practice counselling service and a practice counsellor who has a clinic in the practice once a week to help you talk through emotional issues'. One website's introductory paragraph refers to the 'practice therapist' and 'practice psychologist' and indicated that all referrals to them were made through the GP.

11 websites simply listed 'counselling' or 'therapy' under their lists of services or clinics that were provided, without details on how one would be referred into these. We felt that the language used to discuss the options around clinical support made a large difference in how

welcoming the surgery sounded; for instance, there was a difference in how invitational 'please contact us' felt compared with 'GPs will make referrals'. Although one website did not include information on how to access clinical support, it did invite phone calls from those with mental health concerns to discuss 'further plans'. It was unclear what form this would take but the language and the invitation felt reassuring.

e. Is there anywhere else I can go for support or treatment? Who else can I contact?'

THIS WAY

Nearly half of the websites we reviewed signposted readers to a range of national and local sources of treatment and clinical support; 20 of these covered local services, most commonly the Lambeth Talking Therapies or Solidarity in a Crisis. Other local sources of clinical support referred to included: Lambeth and Southwark Mind, the Awareness Centre, Multi-Ethnic counselling service, SLaM, the 4 in 10 helpline, the Out of Hours SELDOC Service, the Waterloo Counselling centre, a private therapist, Cruse Bereavement Lambeth, the Living Well Network Hub and local Community Mental Health Teams.

Six websites only referred to national sources of support, for instance Samaritans or SANEline. One website referred to a private therapist who charged a fee, and another to the Awareness Centre which is low-cost but still chargeable. However, information about what these services actually offered was limited. For instance, although Lambeth and Southwark Mind was signposted towards, we did not see any description about their online mental health directory explicitly included.

Website signposting to the most relevant local services was inconsistent. For example, Lambeth Talking Therapies was signposted towards 15 times, Solidarity in a Crisis signposted towards seven times, Lambeth and Southwark Mind signposted towards seven times and the Living Well Network Hub was signposted towards only once.

Seven websites neither referred to local sources of support nor included any advice about speaking to the GP. In effect, the absence of both these aspects of information means that seven GP surgeries in Lambeth have effectively have failed to provide any details around how or where to access support for mental health concerns.

Conclusion

Across Lambeth GP websites there was a large variance and inconsistency around how much information about mental health was provided both in terms of general information about mental health and direction as to how to access support.

A few websites were well organised and clear in their presentation of mental health material. However, there were many more examples of websites which did not mention mental health at all, or did not make a concerted effort to make the information accessible or relevant to a wide audience. Worryingly, specific information for children and young people, parents and carers for those with mental health problems were practically left off the radar. Such omissions are a serious concern, especially considering the NHS's endeavours to create parity of esteem across physical and mental health and the large numbers of patients who contact the GP for mental health support.

Websites are a reasonably cost-effective way to access a wide audience and are easily maintained and updated. Simple changes to website content could make substantial improvements to a patient's experience, carrying the potential to get support to those in need or distress even before they make an appointment. Encouraging better quality and consistency of information delivered through GP websites is also very relevant for the future Adult Mental Health Services Alliance contract in Lambeth in supporting borough-wide efforts to direct service users to the right services at the right time.

Recommendations

1. **To standardise information provision and ensure consistency, NHS Lambeth CCG should require and support all GP practices to adhere to a minimum quality standard with respect to the dissemination of mental health information via GP surgery websites. The CCG should work with GP Federations and individual practices and harness the assets within Lambeth's Patient Participation Network and groups.**

Below we present our suggested checklist for a GP surgery website. The checklist has been developed from the best practice identified during our audit. GP surgeries could adopt the checklist to help them review and improve their website or use it to create an adaptable template with the required information.

Theme	Questions to ask	Suggested content
Layout	**Is mental health information easily found and appropriately labelled?**	Provide mental health information under a tab clearly labelled 'mental health' or 'emotional wellbeing' which should be easily identifiable on the homepage of the website to improve navigation and ease of access. Additionally, incorporate mental health information under topics such as 'useful information'.
Language	**Is the language used around mental health appropriate and reassuring?**	Ensure the language used to communicate mental health information online is reassuring, educational and invites conversations around mental health. This will encourage help-seeking behaviour and work towards destigmatising mental health.
Information/ signposting	**Does the website signpost towards sources of information?**	Signpost or provide information on self-care, common symptoms such as anxiety or low mood, and strategies to improve mental health before it becomes critical. The information should reflect the largely varying reasons why patients may be concerned about their mental health. Websites should also either include diagnosis specific information or provide web links to other web pages or organisations that do.

	Is there adequate explanation as to how patients can get help from a GP?	Include a paragraph which explains what could happen if patients come in for a GP appointment to discuss their mental health. This should signpost towards Mind's 'Find the words' material as a useful resource. We would recommend that websites advertise a patient's right to request a double appointment if considering discussing their mental health with a GP.
	Is signposting towards the most relevant local support services included?	Consistently signpost towards: • The Lambeth and Southwark Mind online directory and the Information Hub at Mosaic Clubhouse • The Lambeth Living Well Network • Lambeth Talking Therapies • Crisis services such as Solidarity in a Crisis. Websites should make clear what each service provides and if they accept self-referrals to encourage timely access.
	Does the website reach out to families and carers of people with mental health concerns?	Invite people to speak to their GP if they are worried about a relative or friend. Provide information and signpost towards local services that support parents, friends, family members and carers of those with (un)diagnosed mental health issues such as the Carer's Hub.
	Do websites fairly reflect the diversity of treatment options?	Common treatment options available from the GP should be outlined and explained (i.e. Referral to Talking Therapies or a Community Mental Health Team, medication etc). If GP surgeries want to promote private healthcare services such as private therapists, we strongly recommend that they also advertise low-cost or NHS based services alongside this to ensure that all patients understand the choice of services available.

References

Healthwatch Lambeth, 2015. Finding mental health advice and support in Vassal [pdf]. Healthwatch Lambeth, Lambeth. Available at: http://www.healthwatchlambeth.org.uk/sites/default/files/hwl_vassall_mental_health_ information_report_final_dec_2015.pdf [Accessed 15 December 2016]