Introduction

Patients are often referred to the pain service after a long, frustrating journey through the medical system. The role of the service clinic is primarily one of multidisciplinary rehabilitation, with a strong emphasis on supported self-management. Yet patients often arrive at the clinic expecting “more of the same” – further medical investigation and treatment.

Unrealistic expectations can prove a barrier to effective communication in the initial consultation, and ultimately engagement with the service [1]. The aim of this pilot was to improve communication and engagement by providing more information to both patient and clinician prior to first appointment in the pain clinic.

Methodology

We sent a combined information sheet and questionnaire to 60 patients before their first appointment at the pain clinic.

We analysed responses from 3 sources: patient questionnaires, patient evaluation forms (sent with the questionnaire), and an online evaluation completed by the consultant after the clinic appointment.

Objectives

- Informing patients about what we offer as a service;
- Giving patients an opportunity to tell us what they want from the service;
- Making explicit patients’ expectations, hopes and difficulties, to facilitate frank and open discussion at the initial consultation

Results

Of the 60 questionnaires posted to patients, 38 (63%) were returned unprompted, and a further 11 (18%) were returned after one reminder letter. Median time to return the questionnaire was 2.5 weeks. Approximately 70% of clinicians completed evaluation surveys.

Most patients said the information provided with the questionnaire was helpful (88%), and they now had a clearer idea of what the pain service offered (85%). The questionnaire wasn’t felt by patients to be particularly burdensome.

Clinicians overwhelmingly found the questionnaire to be helpful and informative, particularly regarding patient expectations and mood. Mood screening questions provided a launching point for further discussion when appropriate. Clinicians felt patients were more informed than usual, and in approximately half of cases, more engaged with what the pain service had to offer.

Conclusion

The questionnaire and information pack sent to patients prior to their first appointment at the pain clinic appears to have fulfilled our hopes for this project, namely that both patient and clinician would feel better informed, and patient engagement and clinician-patient communication would be improved. This was a small-scale study, limited by the informal and subjective nature of patient and clinician responses – we didn’t use formal, validated tools to measure engagement or communication, for example. But we feel that we have collected sufficient evidence of the utility of the questionnaire to adopt it as standard practice for our service.


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