



## Case Study:

# Scaling up the Patches Telephone Assistant – Health Care First

## Summary

Health Care First Partnership, a large practice covering 5 sites around Castleford in Yorkshire, were one of the first practices to implement the **new Patches Telephone Assistant**. This cutting-edge new technology allows patients to **submit online consultation requests via the telephone** using voice recognition.

They were overwhelmed by patient calls, sometimes reaching 1,500 calls per day, and this was putting unbearable strain on practice staff. Using a soft launch, they **processed 7% of calls using the Telephone Assistant**, but due to their volume this was a significant number of calls. The potential impact was clear, **calls to reception reduced by 13%** and they made **savings that could translate to 1,248 hours of receptionist time and a potential cost-saving of £10,595 per year**. They are now planning to expand the use of Patches Telephone Assistant which could produce **savings of £79,565+ per year**. They also **improved patient access and reduced pressure on practice staff**.

## Challenge

With 31,953 registered patients, Health Care First Partnership are a very large GP practice. They operate across five sites in and around the Castleford, Yorkshire. At the time they approached us about the Telephone Assistant, they were often receiving 800 calls per day: this was subjecting an already overstretched staff body to an inordinate amount of stress. **Workloads felt unmanageable, and the overall wellbeing of practice staff was at a low level.**

Though Health Care First already had Patches Online Consultation, they had not yet implemented a system of Total Digital Triage<sup>1</sup>. This meant that patient

requests were incoming through multiple channels – and, though they had spent a lot of time working on improving operational processes, **during busy periods patients were waiting over 31 minutes to speak to a member of staff**. Consequently, achieving the NHS England target of 3 minutes felt impossible.

*“We were really excited about the Patches Telephone Assistant. We were constantly inundated with calls to reception and the situation was becoming untenable. We wanted to be able to provide care to all our patients that needed it, but at the same time we had to manage pressures on our own staff. The sheer volume of calls, with often frustrated patients, was having a detrimental impact on staff wellbeing.”*

Jyoti Mehan, CEO, Health Care First



<sup>1</sup><https://www.england.nhs.uk/long-read/digitally-enabled-triage/>

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### Solution

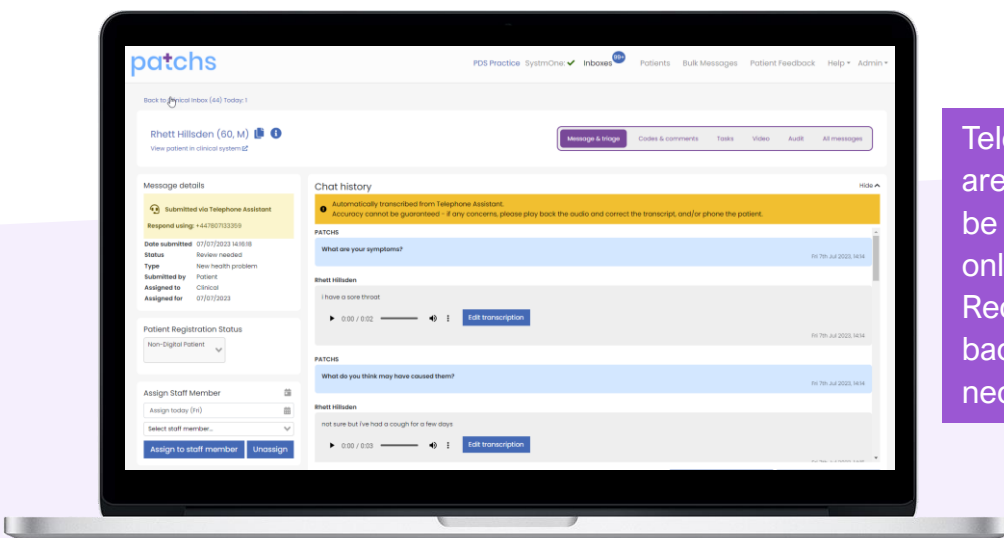
When Health Care First heard about Lingwell Croft's plans to implement the Patches Telephone Assistant (see [Case Study](#)), they were extremely keen to try it for themselves: by processing all incoming calls in parallel, the technology offered the opportunity to **entirely end telephone queues and send call waiting times to zero.**

When it came to implementing the Telephone Assistant, **Health Care First opted for a 'soft' launch** (as opposed to the 'hard' launch strategy implemented by Lingwell Croft). This meant that, rather than forcing all patients to use either i) Patches Online Consultation or ii) the Patches Telephone Assistant equivalent, they simply provided the latter as an option on their telephone system: callers were given the choice as to whether they wished to use the Telephone Assistant, or to remain on hold. **This resulted in the 800 calls received daily falling immediately by up to 100 per day.** This was still a significant number of calls to process through the Telephone Assistant, but for such a large practice it was manageable and allowed staff time to get comfortable with the new technology, whilst monitoring how it was being received by patients.



*“Each practice has different needs, so we made the implementation of the Telephone Assistant as flexible as possible. Practices can just use it at peak times, reserve it for certain patients with accessibility issues, or use it as their default channel”*

Dr Marcus Ong, CEO, Patches Health



Telephone Assistant calls are transcribed so they can be processed like normal online consultation. Recordings can be played back and edited if necessary.

## Scaling up the Patches Telephone Assistant – Health Care First

### Outcome

Comparing the period May - June 2023 to September - October 2023 **telephone calls answered by reception fell 13%** from 25,578 to 22,174 with **7% (1,703 calls) processed via the Telephone Assistant**. The additional reduction is believed to be due to patients using the online version of Patches. They **processed an average of 79 consultations per day via Patches** (combined between Patches online and Patches Telephone Assistant).

#### Impact on Patients

**Patients using the Telephone Assistant have no waiting times** and can submit their requests simultaneously. This contrasts with patients having to wait up to 31 minutes in a queue using the normal telephone route. The **average duration of a Telephone Assistant call was 5.5 minutes**, and patients received support quickly with **requests completed within 45 minutes** on average.

#### Impact on Staff

The Implementation of the Patches Telephone Assistant, led to a **significant reduction in the time receptionists spent talking on the telephone from 27 hours to 22 hours per day - an 18% reduction**. This translates to a **monthly receptionist time saving of 104 hours**. Receptionists are now able to spend less time on the phone and more time dealing with other issues.

The average request (Online and Telephone Assistant) managed by receptionists on Patches takes ~5 minutes for them to complete, so this time saving translates to processing an extra 60 patient requests per day. **Receptionists are more protected from potentially abusive patients and are more able to enjoy their work**. If any Telephone Assistant transcriptions needed editing it only took an average of 1 second per request.

Online Consultations can be challenging for staff depending on how they are implemented. Some practices have only a single member of staff to manage all incoming requests. This can be a lonely task as they may go the whole day without interacting with anyone else. Health Care First wanted to avoid this, so they **created 'The Hub': a dedicated triage room with several desks and a relaxed group environment**. In The Hub, reception staff and clinicians work together collaboratively to complete the triage process. They share ideas, chat, and learn from each other. All this means that **overall wellbeing is improved** – staff even report **'looking forward' to working in The Hub**.

0mins

Patient waiting times

5.5mins

Average call time

<45mins

To complete a request

13%

Reduction in calls to reception

1,248hrs

Receptionist time saved per year

£10,595

Annual cost saving to the practice 3

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### Cost Savings

The cost savings when using the Telephone Assistant will vary by practice depending on how much it is used. Other important factors are reception staff costs and how the the time savings are used.

Health Care First processed **7% of**

**calls through the Telephone Assistant (the Utilisation Rate)**, which resulted in a **monthly saving of 104 hours of receptionist time (equivalent to 1,248 hours per year)**. This translates to a **cost saving of £10,595 per year** after factoring in the cost of the Telephone Assistant

Based on these results, we can estimate potential cost savings for practices adopting a Total Digital Triage approach using Patches and the Telephone Assistant. For a practice receiving approximately 800 calls per day:

Telephone Assistant Utilisation Rate (%)	Annual Cost Savings*
0 - 25	£39,783
25 - 50	£79,565
50 - 75	£119,438
75 – 100	£159,130

### A New Model of Care

Health Care First have found Patches and the Telephone Assistant so valuable that they are now planning to switch entirely to a system of Total Digital Triage. This means that they will be able to manage all their requests in a standard way and clinicians will be able to prioritise care based on clinical need.

*“Patches Telephone Assistant has demonstrated to us that Total Digital Triage is possible without just surfacing more patient demand. We can now start to see a road ahead. We are planning to scale up our use of the Telephone Assistant over the next few months and believe this will help hugely with winter pressures.”*

Jyoti Mehan, CEO, Health Care First

\* This is based on a i) receptionist gross pay rate of £12.50 per hour (£23,000 per year assuming 8 hours per day and 230 days per year) and statutory employer costs of 17.24%, and ii) a Telephone Assistant minutely call charge of 7.3p + VAT per minute.



# Scaling up the Patches Telephone Assistant – Health Care First

*“Given Health Care First’s size – over 32k patients – and dependance on the telephone – processing up to 1,500 calls per day – it was great to demonstrate what the Telephone Assistant could do at scale. The time and cost savings of this new technology were significant. It has the potential to transform the delivery of primary care at scale whilst also improving access for patients that struggle with standard digital technologies.”*

Dr Marcus Ong, CEO, Patches Health

## Key Takeaways

Total Digital Triage with Patches Telephone Assistant:



**Reduces receptionist time** – call volumes fell 13% and they saved the equivalent of 1,248 hours of receptionist time per year using Telephone Assistant.



**Improves access for patients** – patients spend no time queuing when using the Telephone Assistant and it provides patients that cannot use online services a digital-first option.



**Reduces Costs** – implementing Telephone Assistant could save the practice £10,595 per year, increasing to £79,565+ as its usage scales.