



Case Study:

Total Digital Triage with the Patches Telephone Assistant – Lingwell Croft Surgery

Summary

Lingwell Croft Surgery in Leeds were the first GP practice in the UK to trial the **new Patches Telephone Assistant**. This cutting-edge new technology allows patients to **submit online consultation requests via the telephone** using voice recognition.

Their aim was to support their elderly patients and those with low digital literacy skills, whilst also reducing the pressure on practice staff. The results were remarkable. Implementing Total Digital Triage with Patches Telephone Assistant allowed them to **reduce the calls to reception by 41%** and **save the equivalent of 792 receptionist hours per year**. This translated into a **cost-saving of £3,450 per year**, which could **reach at least £11,500 per year** as they scale the Telephone Assistant usage. At the same time, they **improved patient access** and **reduced pressure on practice staff improving the working environment**.

Challenge

Lingwell Croft Surgery is a large and busy GP practice based in Middleton, Leeds, with a patient population of 15,204. Operating in an urban area, with both economic deprivation and an ageing population, adopting a Total Digital Triage approach was never going to be straightforward.

Total Digital Triage¹ is a new model of care recommended by NHS England to enable GP practices to provide care more efficiently at scale. It directs all patients to online consultations, instead of perpetually busy telephone lines, to allow clinicians to manage requests in their own time based on clinical need.

The nature of Lingwell Croft's ageing patient population and low digital literacy meant that simply rolling out an online consultation solution was not by itself going to resolve their access problems. Non-IT literate patients would still overload the telephone lines, and simply introducing online consultations would add another 'lane on the motorway' thereby increasing workload. This is where the Patches Telephone Assistant came in.



“Vulnerable patients struggled to get appointments as like many other GP surgeries our phone lines were very busy in the mornings. Because of this we were keen to adopt a Total Triage Model, however due our large elderly population and low digital literacy there were some significant concerns”

Dr Stephan Claridge, GP, Lingwell Croft Surgery and Clinical Director, Middleton and Hunslet PCN

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

Total Digital Triage with the Patches Telephone Assistant – Lingwell Croft Surgery

Solution

Lingwell Croft were excited to hear about the Telephone Assistant because of its ability to **process voice telephone calls and transcribe them into a written request like a normal online consultation**. Incorporating the Telephone Assistant meant that all incoming requests could be channelled through one portal – Patches. **Patients who used the Telephone Assistant would not have to wait in a queue, and workflows promised to be more streamlined and efficient**. The ultimate result being patients would receive the care they need more quickly and with less burden on the GP practice.

The first step in implementing the Telephone Assistant was to test it with their patient participation group (PPG). The PPG were pleased the practice was trying to support patients unable to use online services. However, they were concerned the Telephone Assistant could block accessing GPs and that it wouldn't understand Yorkshire accents. The practice were pleased the PPG were open to trying the Telephone Assistant and found that



members liked the speed and ease with which they could use it to submit requests.

Once the practice were ready, they went for a 'hard launch'. They opted to encourage all patients wishing to contact them to either i) use Patches online, or ii) use the Telephone Assistant. They made it clear on their website, patient newsletter, and telephone messages that to contact them, these were the only options. This was effective in encouraging usage, although in practice patients that persisted in calling the practice were still able to have the receptionist submit an online consultation on their behalf.

Lingwell Croft further promoted the use of Patches Telephone Assistant by setting up a stall in reception with coffee and biscuits. In-person visitors were asked to try calling them from reception so they could familiarise themselves with the technology.

“Initially there was some resistance to use the new system and the Telephone Assistant service had to be heavily promoted to reassure patients. Soon our patients realised how easy it was to use and using it meant less time waiting on hold. Now the service is used extensively”

Dr Stephan Claridge

Total Digital Triage with the Patches Telephone Assistant – Lingwell Croft Surgery

Outcome

Comparing the period May-June 2023 to September-October 2023 telephone **calls answered by receptionists fell 41%** from 12,025 to 7,095 calls with **15% (1,780 calls) processed via the Telephone Assistant**. The additional reduction in telephone calls (6,188) is believed to be due to patients using the online version of Patches. They **processed an average of 185 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 35 minutes in a queue using the normal telephone route. The average **duration of a Telephone Assistant call was 5.9 minutes**, and patients received support quickly with **requests completed within 70 minutes** on average.

Impact on Staff

All of this also had a remarkable impact on staff. Before Total Digital Triage with the Telephone Assistant, staff were under a lot of pressure. They reported that the telephone queue was often over 30 patients and receptionists spent 10 hours per day talking on the telephone. After, the telephone queue rarely went above 3 and **receptionist talk**

time fell by 31% from 10.3 to 7.1 hours per day. This translates to a **monthly receptionist time saving of 66 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) completed by receptionists on Patches takes ~5 minutes for them to complete, so this time saving translates to processing an extra 38 patient requests per day. Furthermore, now that they are **protected from potentially abusive patients**, staff at Lingwell Croft are **more able to enjoy their work**. If any Telephone Assistant transcriptions needed correcting it only took an average of 7 seconds 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. Lingwell Croft 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

5.9mins

Average call time

<70mins

To complete a request

41%

Reduction in calls to reception

792hrs

Receptionist time saved per year

£3,450

Annual cost saving to the practice 3

Total Digital Triage with the Patches Telephone Assistant – Lingwell Croft Surgery

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 the cost of reception staff and what the time savings are used for.

In this case study, Lingwell Croft

routed 15% of calls through the Telephone Assistant (the Utilisation rate), which resulted in a monthly saving of 66 hours of receptionist time. This translates to a saving of £3,450 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 ~400 calls per day:

Telephone Assistant Utilisation Rate (%)	Annual Cost Savings*
0 - 25	£5,750
25 - 50	£11,500
50 - 75	£17,250
75 – 100	£23,000

A World First

Lingwell Croft is the first practice in the UK (and possibly the world) to use voice recognition technology as a route to primary care. You could say they took a gamble – but it’s one that has definitely paid off.

“We couldn’t have implemented our new Total Digital Triage system without it. Having voice recognition technology means our vulnerable elderly and digital illiterate patients are catered for better and get appointments much easier. Furthermore, having less phone calls has resulted in a more pleasant and calmer environment to work in”

Dr Stephan Claridge, Lingwell Croft Surgery

* 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.

Total Digital Triage with the Patches Telephone Assistant – Lingwell Croft Surgery

“Changing the way GP practices work is never easy so we were delighted by how quickly Lingwell Croft adopted this new technology. The immediate positive impact on receptionists and other practice staff was amazing to see. Working in primary care is extremely challenging, so creating a better work environment is essential for both staff and patients. The key to Lingwell’s success has been their clear vision, strong leadership, and commitment to improve the way they deliver primary care.”

Dr Marcus Ong, CEO Patches Health

Key Takeaways

Total Digital Triage with Patches Telephone Assistant:



Reduces receptionist time – call volumes fell 41% and they saved the equivalent of 792 hours of receptionist time per year since 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 £3,450 per year, increasing to £11,500+ as its usage scales.