BADGER study

Short study summary for the BADGER study

Building an evidence base for the use of ADvice and GuidancE Referrals at the primary-secondary care interface

A mixed methods study

What was the study about?

Advice & Guidance is an electronic process to help GPs and other primary care clinicians receive advice from secondary care specialists (consultants) about a patient's care. It has been in use since 2015, but since the COVID-19 pandemic GPs are being encouraged to use it more to help reduce hospital waiting lists and the NHS recovery. There was very little research about the impact of using Advice & Guidance for patients or clinicians, so the BADGER study was set up to build an evidence base of this process.

What was the aim of the study?

The BADGER study was set up to understand how the process of Advice & Guidance was experienced by patients, clinicians and healthcare commissioners and how its use might be improved.

We broke this down into 4 parts:

1. Describe how Advice & Guidance is used across the NHS
2. Measure the association between Advice & Guidance and quality and use of healthcare
3. Understand the experiences and perspectives of people who are part of the Advice & Guidance process (patients, healthcare practitioners, and commissioners)
4. Develop resources to support best use of Advice & Guidance.

What did we do?

To fully understand the A&G process, we:

- Analysed more than 16 million anonymised patient records
- Interviewed 30 patients, 20 healthcare professionals in GP practices, 20 consultants, and 5 commissioners who work to set up and support the running of Advice and Guidance
- We worked with members of the public, community groups, and media producers to develop resources to share information about A&G with the public

What did we find? - Patient records

Our research used anonymised health records to study how A&G has been used over time, and how its use has impacted patient care, compared to a 'direct' or traditional referral to hospital outpatients.

- A&G use increased over time, likely driven by the COVID-19 pandemic
- Greater differences in referrals for minority ethnic and lower income groups
- A&G had little impact on reducing referral rates
- A&G may result in a longer time to diagnosis for some key conditions
- A&G might be used earlier in people with more complex medical needs
- And there is a possible greater burden on patients with additional GP and hospital visits

In summary: Over time, the use of A&G increased compared to usual referral and may lead to quicker time to important diagnoses.

What did we find? - Interviews

Our interviews with patients, healthcare professionals and commissioners showed how Advice & Guidance can help patients and GPs and improve patient care. The process can:

- Allow primary care healthcare professionals to access patient specific advice,
- Streamlines communication between healthcare professionals
- Provide information quickly to help primary care healthcare professionals care for patients
- Provide reassurance for patients and primary healthcare professionals
- Lead to reduced unnecessary outpatient appointments, which can also save patients time and money associated with hospital visits.

However, we also saw lots of variation in the way that Advice & Guidance was setup and used, and in the quality of communication through the system. There were also challenges with the Advice & Guidance process, including:

- Additional workload and burden for healthcare professionals who use Advice & Guidance
- Difficulties with the Advice & Guidance IT system
- Challenges in public understanding of Advice & Guidance

Further work needs to take place to improve the IT systems and time available for healthcare professionals to write and respond to queries. We have also worked with members of the public to produce information materials to about what Advice and Guidance is, which can be used to share information in GP practices and online.

In summary: When well setup, A&G can be a helpful tool to support primary care clinicians care for the public. However, A&G is inconsistently set up and used across the areas that we investigated, which can cause challenges in some areas. We have identified several areas that need further work to improve this system.

What difference will this make?

We have shared our findings with key health groups: the Department of Health and Social Care, NHS England, Health Services Safety Investigations Body (HSSIB), and Integrated Care Boards, to ensure that our findings can support future use and development of A&G.

We have also produced a series of health information materials to inform the public about A&G. These can be shared online or in GP practices so that patients can be informed about the process before or when it is used in their care. We have shared these materials with several groups to encourage their use across the country.

We will continue to publish and share our findings going forward.

Advice and Guidance resources

You can access the BADGER Advice and Guidance resources at:

www.keele.ac.uk/badger

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