



Evaluation of a trustwide nurse-led advice line for service users with rheumatological conditions

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Project background

The rheumatology nursing team, which comprises clinical nurse specialists working in outpatient settings across several hospital sites in East Kent Hospitals University NHS Foundation Trust, in south-east England, have been running a nurse-led advisory service for more than 20 years. This has primarily run as a telephone support service, but over the past few years has expanded to include text and email advice for both service users and the primary healthcare team around aspects of caring for people with rheumatology conditions. The service is available during office hours on weekdays. To date, there has been no formal evaluation of its effectiveness, although there is anecdotal evidence that service users appreciate it.

Aim

This project aimed to evaluate the experiences of the rheumatology nurse-led advice line from the perspectives of service users and other professional stakeholders, and consequently to identify areas for action to improve the service. Three research questions were identified:

- What is the experience of service users and stakeholders of the nurse-led advice line?
- What areas are experienced positively by stakeholders?
- What areas need to be considered for further development?

Implications for practice

- Stakeholder events can be an effective way of evaluating a service
- A nurse-led advice line can be an effective method of providing access to expertise for both service users and professional stakeholders. Ideally this service should be available 24/7
- The pressures on the NHS, including on availability of GP appointments, make services such as nurse-led advice lines valuable for providing reassurance and keeping service users safe and well
- In a climate when finances often dictate levels of care, there is a need to capture nurse-led activity in a more comprehensive way, linking this to efficiencies such as saved attendances at A&E or GP appointments

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Online

Further information about the project can be accessed from: fons.org/library/report-details?nstd=71901

Key activities and outcomes

• Stakeholder events

Four stakeholder events were held, three for service users and family members and one for professionals. The events for service users all took place at venues independent of the hospital sites in the local towns of Margate, Canterbury and Ashford. The professional stakeholder event took place in a general practice surgery. Consent to undertake the evaluation and therefore the events was achieved through the NHS Research Ethics Committee process. Participants were identified and recruited to the evaluation by each clinical nurse specialist identifying stakeholders who had used the service in the previous three months. Potential recruits were given information about the study and invited to attend a stakeholder event.

• Methods

The same methods were used at each event. Following an explanation about the study, reiteration of the principles of informed consent and clarification that the feedback provided would be anonymous, participants (service users n=30, professionals n=4) were invited to complete an individual cognitive mapping tool to assess specific experiences and provide qualifying statements. They were also asked to participate in a group claims, concerns and issues exercise, and to respond individually to a miracle question ('If you woke up tomorrow and a miracle had happened in the night and you had the most perfect nurse-led advice service for you, what would it look like?').

• Analysis and findings

Data were analysed separately for each method and each venue, using an inductive thematic analysis. A second-level analysis was undertaken across all stakeholder groups to generate insights into the three research questions. Overall, the feedback across the sites was positive and showed that the service was successful and valued. Comments about its being a 'lifeline' were repeated, and service users also highlighted that:

- Knowing the person they were communicating with gave a sense of really being listened to
- Access to the advice line and promptness of response was a positive attribute
- The advice line was not advertised sufficiently
- Some believed they were using the clinical nurse specialist's personal number
- The advice line's voicemail message may be too long
- More information, education and support in the form of a group session would be useful
- The option of a home visit when housebound would be valued

• Actions

A claims, concerns and issues exercise was used by the clinical nurse specialists to facilitate the development of some actions in response to the issues identified through the evaluation. The key messages and headlines from the evaluation have been noted and an improved advice line service is being developed around them. Formal education sessions have now been introduced in two areas of the trust.