P061 PATIENT EXPERIENCE OF TELEPHONE HELPLINE SERVICE DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Aneela T. Devarakonda, Shaza Obaid and Chakameh Faghinejad
United Lincolnshire Hospital Trust, Rheumatology, Lincoln, UNITED KINGDOM

Background/Aims
The rheumatology telephone helpline is a nurse-led essential service that provides reliable medical advice, social and psychological support to help patients cope with the disease. An efficient service is especially important during the COVID-19 pandemic as a significant proportion of rheumatology patients are ‘shielding’ because of immunosuppression and their underlying chronic rheumatological conditions. The pandemic resulted in several drastic changes to the rheumatology department at United Lincolnshire Hospital Trust (ULHT), such as redeployment of staff to the frontline. We performed a local audit to assess patient satisfaction and fulfillment of expectations with the helpline during the lockdown and identify areas of improvement to provide an effective helpline service.

Methods
Patients accessed the helpline by leaving a message over the phone and fifty patients were selected using random sampling. We designed a questionnaire in adherence to RCN guideline. After their query was resolved and obtaining their consent, we assessed their experience by calling them. We analysed the subject of the query and the outcome of the call retrospectively. We aimed to determine if they were psychologically supported, satisfied with the response time and overall, how the query was resolved. We explored their feedback and alternative choices had the helpline not been available.

Results
A significant proportion (40%) of queries were regarding worsening symptoms of rheumatological conditions. Some of these queries were in context of COVID-19. 35% of the queries were medication related, 94% of the calls were attended within 48 hours. Of 50 patients, 88% (44/50) were satisfied with the response time, 82% (41/50) were satisfied with the overall service, and 88% (44/50) felt they were psychologically supported. 84% (47/50) of the respondents have said that they will call the helpline again if required. Had the helpline not been available, 64% (32/50) patients would have visited their GP and 10% (5/50) would have attended A&E. Nearly 29% of the outcomes of the queries were verbal advice alone without further consultations. Other major outcomes were appointment with doctors and prescription renewals. Patient feedback allowed us to identify issues involving communication between patients, GPs and the rheumatology department.

Conclusion
The helpline continued to be highly appreciated by the patients. It plays a crucial role in alleviating patients’ medical and psychological concerns and maintaining continuity of care. During the pandemic, there is an increased necessity to access an effective helpline. Several important changes were made to streamline the information on the trust’s rheumatology web page. We also amended the voice message to better triage patients. A rheumatology helpline template was added for record keeping through the digital dictation system. This will allow the department to communicate with GPs within 48 hours of response;
to alert them regarding changes in medications or other management recommendations.

Disclosure

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