When NHS Blackpool looked at the way in which urgent care was managed in the area, the decision was made to bring the Out-of-Hours (OOH GP) service and the Emergency Department (ED) together - to commission in-hours primary care provision under one roof. This new urgent care centre would use NHS Pathways (previously used on the telephone), to triage people at the reception point. However, it quickly became clear that there were more innovative ways in which the assessment tool could be used, so they set up a pilot project to use the NHS Pathways tool at the urgent care centre reception.

This seemed like a natural progression for NHS Blackpool as it offered consistency in the way in which patients were being triaged, regardless of the way they tried to access urgent or emergency care.

It also meant that many of the patients who presented at the urgent care centre could be sent to other more appropriate NHS services. This would ensure that only true emergencies were dealt with by the ED at Blackpool Victoria Hospital. Primary care services are co-located within the urgent care centre, this means that many patients who do not need to be seen in the ED can be seen by a GP on site. This leads to patients being seen more quickly and frees up ED staff to see genuine emergency cases.

Amanda Doyle, a GP and the chief clinical officer for Blackpool Clinical Commissioning Group, explains: “In Blackpool we had large numbers of patients attending the emergency department - either because they felt that their condition was quite urgent or more commonly because they didn’t really know where to access care quickly when they needed it. This was particularly so at weekends or out of hours. Many of these patients could actually have been helped by other services in the community. There are walk-in centres, pharmacies and a patient’s own GP practice; there are actually lots of other ways for patients to access care that don’t involve coming to an ED. Making sure that people are seen by the right person at the right time means that the ED can deal with very serious cases.”

A combination of large numbers of tourists and a deprived population with many complex health problems means that health needs are very high.
Care is often sought in an unplanned way and because many people do not know where else to turn, their first thought is to attend ED when they need care.

Using NHS Pathways Reception Point, staff at Blackpool Victoria Hospital Urgent Care Centre are now able to re-direct many patients to more appropriate care settings - rather than passing them straight to ED. This is possible because the reception staff carry out the initial clinical assessment process at the front desk.

Amanda says: “During the pilot, we found that we were consistently diverting between seventeen and twenty percent of patients who attended ED to primary care services. We use NHS Pathways Reception Point to enable us to do that. It is a safe and well established tool which uses a clinical algorithm, asking patients a set of questions relating to their symptoms. The outcome is that patients are immediately booked into the ED or they are referred to our urgent care centre. There, we have a range of primary care professionals who can more appropriately deal with the patient’s problem.”

Amanda adds: “Another problem to be addressed is that ED are very busy and staff are under a huge amount of pressure. With a mixture of very sick people and people with much more minor complaints, there is still an obligation on the staff to make sure that everybody who comes into ED is seen and treated within four hours. Using Reception Point helps staff to meet this target.

“Since we’ve been using NHS Pathways at the reception to ED, we’ve found that the patients who are seen in ED are much more clinically appropriate for that service. Patients who in the past might have been seen in ED, because that’s where they attended, are now being seen more appropriately in a primary care service or a community setting. This means ED staff can focus on those who are seriously injured or ill.”

Amanda’s advice, for people who are looking at adopting NHS Pathways at a reception in their locality, is that there is a lot to be gained by ensuring that patients are seen in the most appropriate place.

She explains: “You have to understand that this was part of a much bigger unscheduled care project. It is no good simply turning people away from ED. You must have somewhere appropriate for them to be seen with the necessary skills and services and within an appropriate time scale. All of the staff have to fully understand NHS Pathways and how it works. And clinicians, particularly in ED but also in primary care, need to be fully engaged in the process.

“The big value of NHS Pathways at reception is that people who are seriously ill and need ED services are seen more quickly. The staff also have more time to devote to those patients. We also use NHS Pathways to direct patients who are uncertain as to where to get treatment, into the most appropriate service. For those who don’t need ED, this means they are dealt with more quickly and appropriately - rather than spending long periods of time waiting in ED with a problem that shouldn’t really be in there in the first place.”

The Blackpool Urgent Care Centre has seen major improvements in care delivery during this pilot and there have also been significant cost benefits. Appropriate referral has meant staffing levels in each department can be proactively managed. This and avoidance of unnecessary investigations or referrals has resulted in very substantial savings. This has released money for use in other areas of care.

The Reception Point pilot is part of a broader unscheduled care strategy which is being delivered by Blackpool NHS over the coming months. The pilot will continue with other services being integrated as the strategy is delivered.

For further information on NHS Pathways visit:
http://www.connectingforhealth.nhs.uk/systemsandservices/pathways

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