RAPID REVIEW: DIGITAL CHAMPIONS IN PRIMARY CARE

KEY FINDINGS FROM THE EVALUATION OF AN ACTION LEARNING SET APPROACH TO DIGITALLY UPSKILLING GENERAL PRACTICE NURSES

RAPID REVIEW
MAY 2020

Royal College of General Practitioners
Staffordshire STP Technology Enabled
Care Service

RCGP Royal College of General Practitioners

This rapid review document is based on the findings of the full report *Creating Digital Champions in Primary Care* (RCGP 2020), a joint effort between the Royal College of General Practitioners and the Staffordshire STP Technology Enabled Care Service. We acknowledge and appreciate the time and effort given by all of those people who participated in the ALS sessions, provided the feedback and helped produce this report. Please see the full report for a complete list of authors and acknowledgements.

Date of publication
May 2020

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Introduction

This rapid report provides the headline findings following an evaluation of the roll out of the Northern Staffordshire Technology Enabled Care Services (TECS) programme. The full evaluation report, *Creating digital champions in primary care*, can be found on the RCGP's [evolving general practice](#) webpage.[1]

The Northern Staffordshire TECS programme upskills general practice nurses (GPNs) to be more confident and capable when facilitating patients to use digital technology to support their care. An action learning set approach (ALS) was taken to deliver training with the intention of creating digital nurse champions in primary care who could encourage and explain the use of a range of digital solutions such as GP online services, health apps, social media and closed online community groups (for example, hosted on Facebook, Whatsapp etc).[2]

The intended impact of the programme is to upskill GPNs to have improved digital skills and so:
● improve outcomes
● improve the ability to self-care
● improve access to relevant and useful information
● reduce the number of face-to-face appointments
● release capacity
● promote prevention
● demonstrate the value of technology enabled care services.

The programme significantly contributes towards creating a digitally ready and digitally active workforce. The evaluation confirmed the programme resulted in GPN confidence significantly improving by the upskilling training. The majority of GPNs feel ready to use digital technology as part of their practice after the training, versus half feeling worried at the beginning. Prior to the training sessions, GPNs relied mostly on traditional methods (e.g. telephone bookings, hardcopy information, letters etc). When digital solutions were used it was often on an ad hoc basis only. At initiation, only 10% of GPNs estimated that they used digital technology more than half of the time in practice. By the end of the programme, this increased to 50% of GPNs using digital technology more than half of the time.

The approach taken successfully creates champions who are confident at sharing their knowledge and expertise in TECS. At the end of the programme, 97% of participants agree they are confident in helping colleagues to use TECS. The evaluation suggests that increased GPN confidence and the process of utilising TECs in the practice results in greater acceptance of digital tools. GP and staff buy-in is key to making progress in embedding TECS within a practice. A senior GP who can champion in the approach is very useful, but support external from the team (e.g. from the PPG) also helps support culture change.

Just as important as GPN confidence and GP champions is the pragmatic and realistic approach taken. The programme supports GPNs to make small but steady, manageable changes and being a source of support for colleagues. This approach was

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[1] RCGP (2020). *Creating Digital Champions in Primary Care*
[2] CliniTECS [Internet]. *ALS action plan template*.

important to successfully embed change and gain the confidence of colleagues within the practice. GPNs particularly supported relatively simple changes to transition from traditional to digital methods that make a big impact.

For example:
- better promotion of booking and cancelling appointments by using GP online services
- use of trusted health care management apps
- sharing of trusted information digitally
- use of SMS text systems and social media to communicate more effectively.

Impact on patients and the practice
The evaluation of the programme identified a number of benefits on patient care and the practice, summarised below.

It was found the use of social media enables engagement with harder to reach groups and groups who historically had poorer engagement. Younger and busy professionals liked the use of social media and other digital solutions because they found them easy and convenient to use. A key factor in this is the use of digital tools that patients, carers and clinicians are familiar with. For example, virtually all GPNs introduced or updated a Facebook page for the practice. Facebook is by far the most popular form of social media used by GPNs to promote their practice.

TECS improves access to information empowering the individual and so enabling greater self-care by building an individual's knowledge of their health issues. It was found that accessible information is a key enabler to patients being able to have genuine conversations about their health during consultations. TECS improve consultations for patients and clinicians with patients more engaged in their care. Increased engagement allowed for more informed discussions and person-centred risk-sharing conversations.

The impact on the practice – in addition to the culture change – includes an increase in non-face-to-face or non-traditional appointments. Digital methods of appointment booking and cancellation, prescriptions, check-in processes and SMS messaging have helped lessen the pressure on the practice.

Challenges
It was found that GPNs encountered challenges related to culture, attitude and variation in processes. This included concerns around compliance with information governance and the need for digital solutions to complement practice policies and procedures. During the programme it transpired that there is a learning curve for colleagues and for patients when introducing the use of TECS that is often unaccounted for. To navigate this learning curve, it is crucial to start small and gradually implement TECS in a manageable way.

The risk of the digital exclusion was encountered by a small proportion of GPNs, generally encompassing a combination of older patients and patients not comfortable using TECS. This is an important challenge to manage but it was reported by a small proportion of GPNs, whereas most responses in relation to patient feedback were very positive.

Recommendation

It is possible that had there been a third ALS session or a longer period for GPNs to embed the learning in their practice – something that a significant number of GPNs commented upon in the evaluation process – the increase in individual and average scores would have been greater.
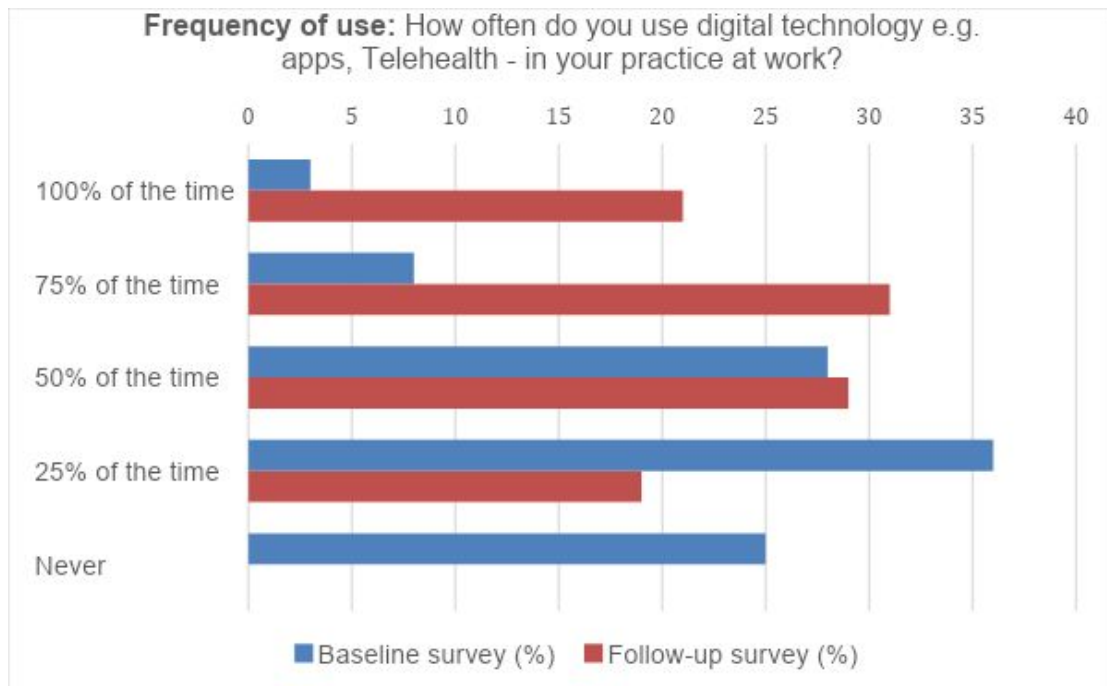
Key results

Figure 1. The programme and digital GPNs make practices more accepting of technology enabled care
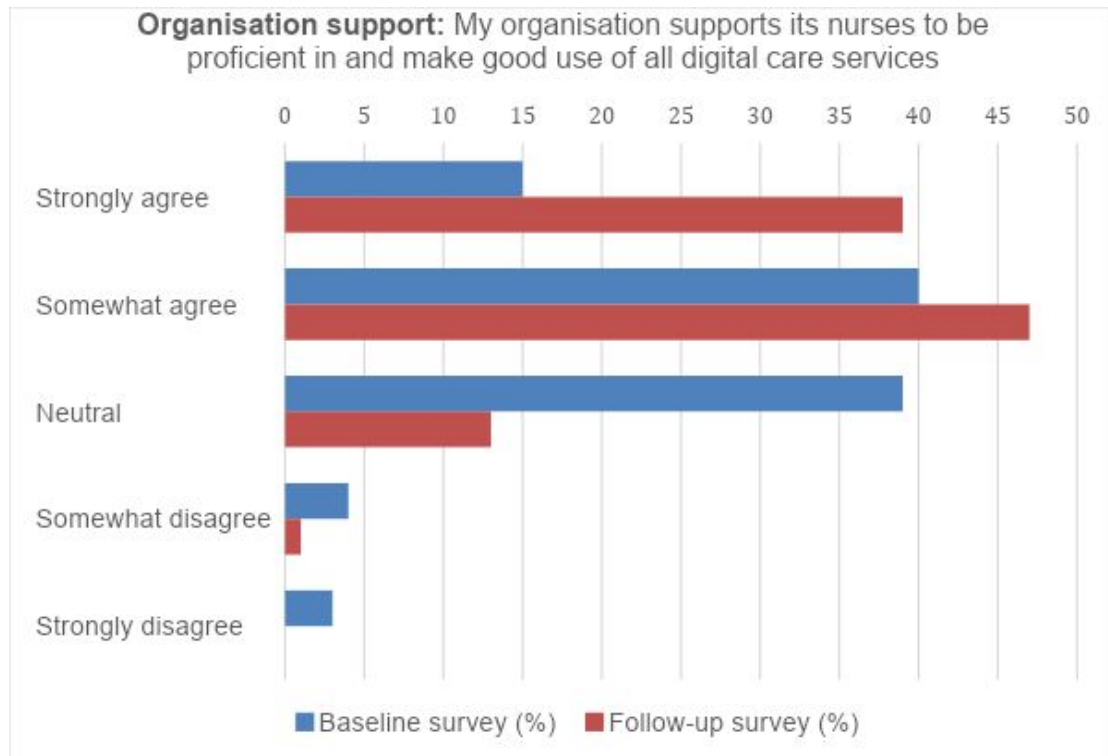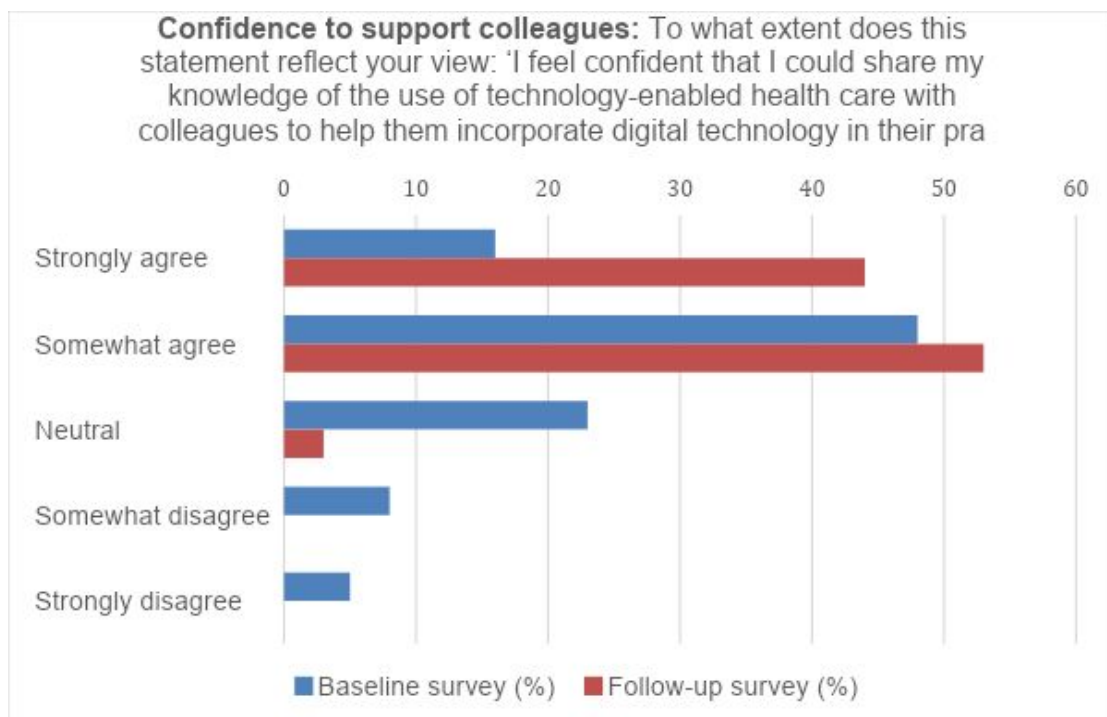

*as reported by GPNs

Figure 2. Utilisation of technology enabled care services increases substantially through the 8-week programme

Frequency of use: How often do you use digital technology e.g. apps, Telehealth - in your practice at work?

*as reported by GPNs

Figure 3. The programme significantly improves GPN confidence to support colleagues; this is a key enabler supporting practices to embrace digital tools

Confidence to support colleagues: To what extent does this statement reflect your view: 'I feel confident that I could share my knowledge of the use of technology-enabled health care with colleagues to help them incorporate digital technology in their pra

*as reported by GPNs

More information

More information is available on the ALS approach and the findings on the CliniTECS website; the full report is available on the RCGP's evolving general practice webpage.[3,4]

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[3] CliniTECS [Internet].
[4] RCGP (2020). *Creating Digital Champions in Primary Care*

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1. RCGP (2020). *Creating Digital Champions in Primary Care.* https://www.rcgp.org.uk/clinical-and-research/our-programmes/innovation/evolving-general-practice.aspx [accessed 14 May 2020]
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