

Saving lives through effective patient engagement around NHS health checks

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Abstract

Purpose – Putting behavioural insights theory into practice a trial in Southwark using iPLATO Hub to communicate with over 13,000 patients concluded that the right combination of text messaging and letter content increased uptake of NHS Health Checks by 65 per cent. This iPLATO case study, based on a randomised controlled trial with the Department of Health, Public Health England and Southwark Council, reported in July 2015. The purpose of this paper is to spread best practice and help other parts of the country transform uptake to NHS Health Checks.

Design/methodology/approach – This research – led by the Department of Health and Southwark Council – was designed to test the impact of certain forms of communication informed by insights from behavioural science. These insights involved small, pragmatic and very low cost or free changes to the invitation process, for example, how messages are framed and the language used. These changes are designed to fit within existing practice, which means they can easily be scaled up across all CCGs.

Findings – Results from the trial also indicate that a combination of the deadline commitment letter and just a reminder text message (no primer message) was nearly as effective as two texts, while the new letters on their own (without any text messages) increased uptake to 21 per cent. This suggests that clear and concise text messages from the iPLATO Hub delivered the major impact on uptake.

Originality/value – iPLATO is working with the research group to expand the research and improve on the reported findings while helping to spread best practice across the NHS.

Keywords: Health care quality, Information technology, Communication, General practice

Paper type: Case study

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iPLATO provides mobile technology solutions to the NHS, primarily focusing on the needs of Healthcare Commissioners and GP practices. The company's flagship product – iPLATO Patient Care Messaging – is now used by over 1,000 GP practices to communicate with over 10 million patients.

In NHS Financial Year 2014/2015 (April 2014-March 2015) patients and practices in the UK used iPLATO Patient Care Messaging to free up 238,000 urgent GP appointments through SMS cancellation. This improved access to GP services, saved over £10m and reduced pressure on A&E. The adoption of iPLATO as the provider of choice for text messaging services is expected to accelerate as CCGs and GP practices in England look for a replacement to NHSmail SMS.

Funded by the CCG, GP practices in Southwark have been using iPLATO Patient Care Messaging for some time. Many practices in Southwark are keen users of the Health Promotion feature on the iPLATO service, for example, to invite patients for seasonal flu immunisation. This feature allows the practice to identify patients within their GP system (Emis, Vision or TPP SystemOne), contact them quickly via SMS and Read Code the communication for audit and reimbursement purposes.

NHS Health Checks is a lifestyle check offered to 40-74 year olds. The programme is a key priority for Public Health England and local authorities in their efforts to tackle premature mortality and promote healthy lifestyles. However, uptake rates have remained low with uptake of appointments by those invited by letter alone in Southwark reaching 18 per cent in 2012/2013.

This research – led by the Department of Health and Southwark Council – was designed to test the impact of certain forms of communication informed by insights from behavioural science. These insights involved small, pragmatic and very low cost or free changes to the invitation process, for example, how messages are framed and the language used. These changes are designed to fit within existing practice, which means they can easily be scaled up across all CCGs.

With texting being the communication tool of choice for patients, it was clear that involving SMS in one form or another would be a significant part of this study on how to change behaviour positively. As a result, the impact of text messaging became a key component of the study and because of the suitability of the iPLATO service and the positive interaction that the iPLATO team already had with Southwark CCG, iPLATO was asked to provide the texting part of the research study.

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iPLATO had to develop a new cloud based product – the iPLATO Hub – to support this Borough-wide trial. Subject to consent from both the practice and their patients, iPLATO Hub aggregates data from multiple practices to deliver a population-wide campaign. At the time of the trial, the iPLATO Hub supported text messaging but, following the success of the service, additional communication channels are being added. The study included 13,800 participants across 28 GP practices and was carried out between November 2013 and December 2014. Participants were randomly allocated to receive either the standard letter (Figure 1) used across England, or to receive one of three newly constructed letters. Participants were also randomly allocated to either not receive any text messages, to receive a primer text message (Figure 2) or a reminder text message (Figure 3); or both primer and reminder text messages.

The language used for the text messages and the new letters was designed based on behavioural insight theory to be both simple and clear to the recipients and geared towards requesting a positive action from the participant. The trial called for the accompanying text messages to be sent a week before the invitation letter, to prime participants to expect a letter; or a week after, to remind participants that they had received a letter and an action from them was required.

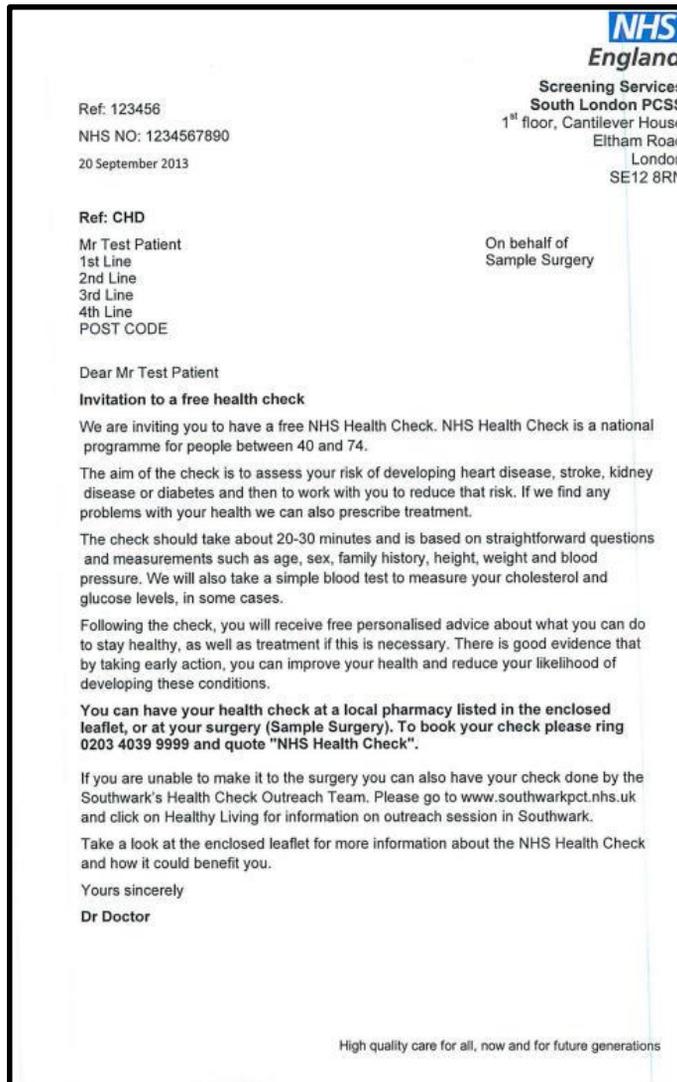
Results

As can be seen in Figure 4 the most successful invitation combination included a letter with a “deadline commitment” (i.e. your NHS Health Check is due in August) (Figure 5) accompanied by both a primer and reminder text message. This combination delivered an uptake of 30 per cent, a 12 per cent absolute increase and a 65 per cent relative improvement in uptake of NHS Health Checks compared to 18 per cent for the standard letter and no text messages.

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Figure 1.

Control: this is the standard invitation letter in use, based on the national template:



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Figure 2.

Primer text message.



Figure 3.

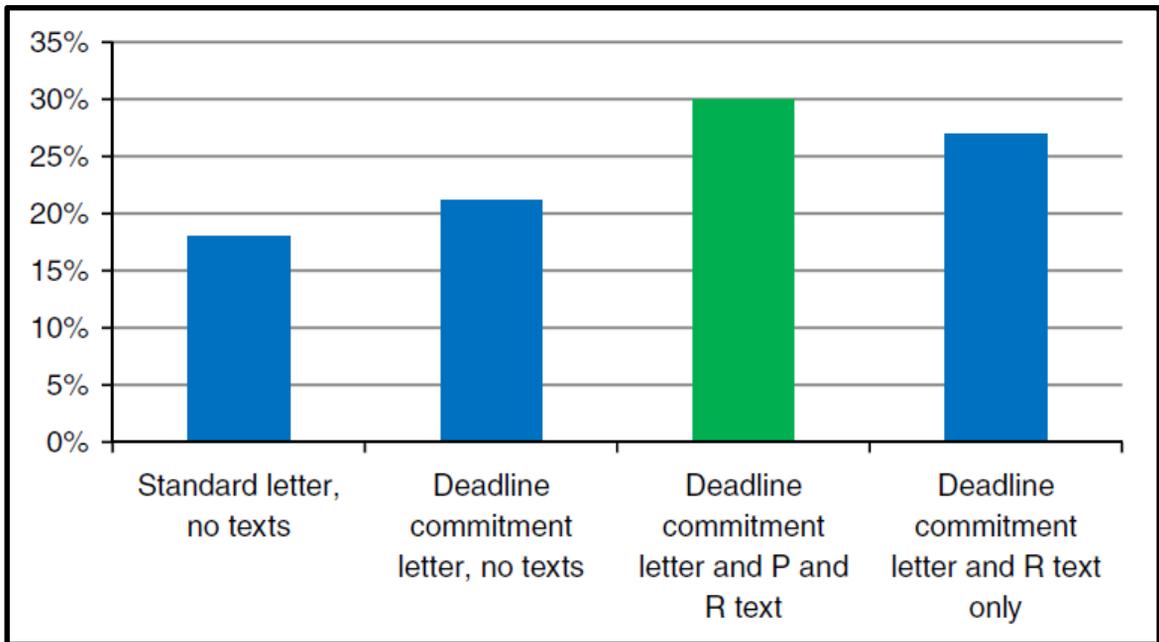
Reminder text message.



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Figure 4.

Invitation combinations: success rates.



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Figure 5.

Letter 2 deadline commitment: this is similar to letter 1, with the tear-off slip, but also uses more direct language to encourage quick action by a deadline – “Your NHS Health Check is due in August”.



Dear <to be inserted by mail merge>

Your NHS Health Check is due in August.

Please call <to be inserted by mail merge> as soon as possible to make sure you get your appointment at your GP's surgery and record this on the tear off slip below.

You can also have your health check at your local pharmacy listed in the enclosed leaflet. To book, please ring 0203 4039 9999 and quote 'NHS Health Check'.

Yours sincerely

Dr <to be inserted by mail merge>

✂

Please record the date and time of your appointment and stick it on your fridge.

Name: <to be inserted by mail merge>

GP practice: <to be inserted by mail merge>

I am going to my NHS Health Check on __/__/13 at ____am/pm

Practice address: <to be inserted by mail merge>



Finally, iPLATO is working with the research group to expand the research and improve on the reported findings while helping to spread best practice across the NHS.

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Source:

Clinical Governance: An International Journal Vol. 20 No. 3, 2015 pp. 108-112

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1477-7274

DOI 10.1108/CGIJ-08-2015-0025

<http://www.emeraldinsight.com/doi/10.1108/CGIJ-08-2015-0025>

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