

## NAME

Emily Symington

## ORGANISATION

Croydon CCG

## POSITION

GP in Croydon and CCG Clinical Lead for Proactive and Preventative Care

**SUMMARY**

Innovative group consultations were introduced to **five surgeries in Croydon**. This activity was led by one of the surgery's GPs who is passionate about driving change. An initial pilot was funded through a grant received from **Health Education South London**. Subsequent training has been funded via the CCG. Patients attending the groups left feeling more confident, having had their questions answered, and often continued to support each other away from the group. Plans are being developed to spread this technique to other interested practices and clinical conditions so more patients can benefit.

**OVERVIEW AND REASON FOR CHANGE**

I am a salaried GP working in south London. A few years ago, I took up a role with Croydon CCG as clinical lead for a programme of work focusing on prevention, self-care and shared decision making. "Proactive and Preventative Care" as this programme is known is looking to embed proactive and patient centred care as routine practice across Croydon.

It was while I was trying to work out how to make the principles of patient-centred care a reality that I came across the idea of **group consultations**. By seeing patients for longer and in a more relaxed environment, group consultations open the potential to **discuss health in its broader context**, allowing the conversation to move naturally from medical firefighting to **holistic support** and **encouraging patients to take personal responsibility** for staying healthy.

As the **participants of groups are encouraged to ask questions of the clinician**, there is an opportunity to **provide clarity** and **improve understanding**. Consulting in a group allows **patients to assimilate the information given to them** and **come to their own conclusions**, away from the pressure to 'say yes' to the clinician in front of them, a step towards **genuine shared decision making**.

**WHAT DID YOU DO?**

After a lot of persuading and a few sleepless nights I managed to get a **pilot of group consultations** in Croydon off the ground. Three years down the line I have not been disappointed. I have learned a huge amount about the logistics (and headaches) of establishing something new in the health service. For example, sometimes the simplest things

feel disproportionately complicated, like ensuring patients are given the correct information to arrive at the same time (not individually 10 minutes apart) and ensuring the whole practice knows how the session will run on the day. But once facilitator, patients and clinician are in that room together good things happen naturally.

## WHAT HAPPENED?

In the group consultation setting I have seen patients **providing holistic support to each other** in a genuinely supportive environment, like the gentleman who was trying to work out how to manage his life and type 2 diabetes, following the death of his mother for whom he had been a full time carer. I have listened as conversations shift from 'it's not my fault I'm fat' to insightful reflection on how individuals can make realistic lifestyle changes in the context of their often very challenging personal circumstances.

As a GP running a group consultation I have been asked wide-ranging and sometimes challenging questions about the nature of a long-term condition or the treatments available. But these answers are often greatly improved by a **patient adding their real-life experiences**. One example occurred recently, when I was rescued from a dry explanation of why a COPD patient should not stop his tiotropium inhaler by the woman sitting next to him, who described how her breathing deteriorated when she ran out of her inhaler during a holiday.

I am aware there is an irony that in my experience, patient-centred care is achieved by seeing patients as a group. In my view, this is achieved by the group environment facilitating a holistic discussion which is **led by the patients' agenda**, meaning there is **less opportunity for the clinician to dominate**. Our feedback is that patients attending groups leave feeling **more confident**, have had their questions answered, and often **continue to support each other away from the group**.

## FINANCE AND COMMISSIONING

The initial pilot of group consultations in Croydon was funded through a **grant received from Health Education South London**. Subsequent training has been **funded via the CCG**.

Development of group consultations in Croydon is being built into commissioning plans going forward.

Group consultations represent routine patient care and provide efficiency gain once established. Practices are therefore not funded to provide group consultations but are supported to embed this new way of working.

## NEXT STEPS: SUSTAINABILITY AND SCALABILITY

Group consultations are currently embedded in two general practices in Croydon, being provided for patients with diabetes, COPD and those needing to adopt a healthy lifestyle. Plans

are being developed to **spread this technique to other interested practices** and clinical conditions, so more patients can benefit.

## PATIENT STORIES

— The views of patients involved in group consultations:

"I would just like to thank you for your time and arranging this group session. It has been very interesting, and you are all very kind."

"I liked the relaxed environment very reassuring and asking questions to doctor was easy."

"Seeing results against other peoples – good to compare – sinks in."

— The views of staff involved in group consultations:

"It worked so much better than I thought." "Just do it, get started!" "We can use this to do our annual reviews on an ongoing basis."

— During the Croydon pilot, for patients attending diabetic group consultations we found the average reduction in HbA1c for patients was 7.1 mmol/mol over 6 months; poorly controlled patients achieved twice this, at 13.2 mmol/mol.

### REFLECTIONS: TOP TIPS FOR OTHER GPs CONSIDERING SETTING UP SOMETHING SIMILAR:

- **Some training**, particularly of facilitators, is required to get started with group consultations. However, the key challenge is to ensure the **group style of consulting is built into routine ways of working** to ensure sustainability. Most practices who have implemented group consultations agree; just do it!
- Further support is available from The British Society of Lifestyle Medicine and [www.GroupConsultations.com](http://www.GroupConsultations.com)