

Continuously Improving Patient Care – St Helens Rheumatology

There has been a Rheumatology unit at St Helens Hospital for over 25 years. It has always been an innovative unit, constantly looking to develop. Previous assessments carried out focused on whether the unit demonstrated evidence based practice. However, although this ensured that they were delivering high quality health care, they wished to focus more directly on the service offered to customers - the patients and their family and therefore they turned to Customer Service Excellence to help achieve this.

St Helens Rheumatology is a multi-disciplinary health care team, who look after patients with rheumatological conditions, particularly those with inflammatory arthritis. They seek to put patients at the heart of their service.

Most of their patients are long term users of the service and what they wanted to know was, how well they were doing at meeting their patient's needs.

They wanted an assessment tool which, not only assessed where they were 'now' but, also enabled them to continuously improve.

The Journey

Initially, they reviewed the standard on the Customer Service Excellence website and agreed that it seemed to be the tool which they were looking for – with its focus on the customer at the centre of the service. They arranged for an assessment body to give a presentation to all the members of the team. This confirmed that not only was this tool focused on the customer, but that the information it required them to provide seemed entirely relevant to their service and therefore did not feel like an added burden. The tool was practical; it enabled them to self-assess their capabilities before deciding to go for independent validation.

Having done this, they decided to seek independent validation by applying for formal accreditation. They achieved certification in March 2009.

“Our first objective was to assess how good our service was with the aim of identifying areas which required improvement” said Dr Abernethy, Consultant Rheumatologist. .

The Standard itself.....

Dr Abernethy commented, “We found the Standard was very thorough and clearly identified the areas to be assessed and what evidence we needed to produce for each criterion. We could immediately see that the areas to be assessed were relevant to the service which we aimed to provide. On first reading the criteria we felt

there were some that we were already achieving and others that would require more work. None of the criteria's seemed irrelevant or pointless.

All members of the department were involved in the preparation for the assessment. We formed 5 groups with each group taking responsibility for one criterion, although the information was gathered from the whole team. We had regular meetings with the whole team to facilitate completion of the evidence required. This way, every member of the team was involved in the process.

“I really feel that Customer Service Excellence was the obvious next step in our continuous Improvement”

The assessors took their time to ensure that they knew what St Helens Rheumatology services was all about before undertaking the initial a desktop review. They received feedback on the day to let them know that they considered appropriate for a more detailed assessment. Within 2 weeks they received written feedback detailing the areas which would be assessed by face to face meetings with service users, staff and colleagues from other disciplines and also any areas in which further written evidence was required.

“Although we were anxious about the assessment day, the assessors immediately put all the patients, staff and colleagues at ease” said Dr Abernethy, “We were delighted to have achieved the award. We received detailed feedback on each criterion. We found this encouraging in the areas in which we had performed well and very useful in the areas that we needed to develop further”.

Long term Impact....

St Helens Rheumatology stated - they were proud at being the first unit in the hospital to achieve Customer Service Excellence accreditation but were also aware of the responsibility that it carried in ensuring that they continue to provide a high quality service. They have gained a very useful insight into the service that they provide and have become aware of the fact that, although they considered themselves to be a patient focused service, “we had to some extent assumed that we knew what things were important to our service users, rather than asking them what was important to them! Customer Service Excellence is all about continual assessment and improvement”.

What the patient thinks

“Whilst the Rheumatology Dept has been working towards the Customer Service Excellence Award I feel that patients have become better informed about the services available within Rheumatology. As a patient using the service on a regular long term basis, the introduction of a newsletter specifically for Rheumatology has been of great value. It has not only kept me informed of services available but also has information about staff members that helps me feel more comfortable knowing who is looking after me.”

Stefan Balshaw, Patient and Chair Person of Patient Reference Group (Rheumatology, St Helens & Knowsley Hospitals)

What next...

Their assessment particularly identified the need to ask their patients what their priorities were rather than just assuming that they knew what they wanted. Since the assessment St Helens Rheumatology have asked their patient reference group to identify the areas that are important to them, and are now in the process of consulting with a much wider patient group to identify patients' priorities so that they can ensure that they focus on the areas which are important. They will then be able to survey patients to see how well they are doing in these areas and seek to improve.

In addition they will continue to regularly assess performance in terms of delivery, timeliness, information, professionalism and staff attitude.

“Customer service excellence is a driver of continuous improvement which is assisting us in the further development of our service rather than simply meeting a standard and stopping or even worse slipping backward”.