



45-49 year old Health Check Case Study: Goulburn Valley Community Health Service

Goulburn Valley Community Health Service operates a small medical clinic, currently 1 EFT GP and 1 EFT practice nurse with administrative support, which is integrated with other community health services and programs. The clinic initiated a strategic approach to offering 45-49 year old health checks to all of its eligible clients after hearing of the new item number from the Goulburn Valley Division of General Practice.

Client Recruitment

Eligible clients were identified from the clinic's client register and were sent a letter of invitation. The response rate was poor, so the GP and nurse decided to also offer the service opportunistically as eligible clients presented to the clinic for other reasons. This approach proved slightly more successful.

It is believed that the majority of community health clients did not enthusiastically respond to offers of a health check because the potential benefits of the service in the future were seen as less important than addressing current problems in their lives. The notion of prevention and self-responsibility for health was generally not well understood by clients.

Health check and follow up

Clients that did agree to the service began by seeing the practice nurse for an assessment and draft client action plan. This was followed up with an appointment with the GP who would discuss findings with the client and agree with them on a client action plan and to organise further preventive services or treatment if required. These sessions took approximately one hour in total, per client.

Sometimes the health check uncovered an existing chronic illness that was not known by the client or providers. These clients were offered a GP-led care plan at a subsequent visit. SMS messaging, direct calling and opportunistic face-to-face reminders were used to encourage attendance at follow-up visits, however prompting clients to come back for a care plan was a "constant battle" for the practice nurse.

Clients that received a 45-49 year old health check were enthusiastic about the service. "Once you get talking to them regarding their height, weight, blood pressure and habits and say 'this is where you are at, and this is where you are heading', some clients are surprised... [however] we have to work hard to maintain their enthusiasm to implement an action plan" says clinic nurse Chris Flower.

Service Viability

Establishing the 45-49 year old health check initiative did not incur significant start-up costs. The local division of general practice provided education on the item number free of charge (as well as the care planning items), and also provided templates that the providers could use when assessing the client. Administrative costs when identifying and recruiting clients were minimal.

Approximately 98% of clients were bulk-billed for the service, and the bulk-billed MBS remuneration of \$102.20 made provision of the service viable. Viability was enhanced by the contribution of the nurse in assessing the patient and drafting an action plan. However, time spent trying to convince clients to attend subsequent visits and in helping them implement their action plans meant that the item may have been a loss-maker on occasion.

The care planning items were all profitable for the clinic. These were only offered if the GP and nurse were convinced they would make a difference, and some clients were also not interested in the service.

Enablers

- Leadership from the practice manager to establish the service and support from the medical administration assistant in billing
- Leadership from the practice nurse to recruit clients for the service and to perform the majority of tasks associated with the assessment and action plan - the nurse role freed up much of the GP time and made the service viable
- Support from the local division of general practice
- Other clinics in the local area gave some advice and links with the Australian Practice Managers' Association and Australian Practice Nurses' Association also assisted
- Monthly clinic meetings with the CEO, Team Manager, GP, practice nurse, practice manager and administrative assistant allowed the clinic opportunities to innovate, to discuss challenges and to celebrate successes.

Challenges

- Poor client response to recruitment drives was frequently challenging and required persistence and innovation
- The clients that were not willing to attend follow-up appointments somewhat diminished the benefit of the health check, as the practice could not be sure whether or not clients were following their agreed action plan and could not support them
- An inability to recruit more GPs to the clinic in an area of acute workforce shortage was challenging. Non vocationally-registered GPs could have been recruited however due to the fact that these GPs attract lower Medicare rebates, the financial returns would not have been sufficient to sustain their employment in community health.

With thanks to Chris Flower.