



Enter & View

Probus surgery dispensary

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1 Introduction

1.1 Details of visit

Service provider: Probus surgery dispensary

Service Address: Tregony road, Probus, Truro,
TR2 4ZJ

Date and time: 22nd September 10am–1230pm

Authorised representative: Nigel Oakes

1.2 Purpose of visit

This visit was conducted as part of a rolling programme of service visits across clinical service providers. Our goal was to observe the service in action, hear directly from patients, and make recommendations for improvement.

1.3 Acknowledgements

Healthwatch Cornwall would like to thank patients and staff for providing a warm welcome and their positive contribution to this Enter and View visit and the subsequent report.

1.4 Disclaimer

This report relates to findings observed on the specific date above and is not a representative portrayal of the experiences of all patients and staff, only an account of what was observed and contributed at the time of the visit.

1.5 About Healthwatch Cornwall

Healthwatch Cornwall is an independent organisation committed to amplifying the voices of Cornwall's residents in the planning and delivery of health and social care services. Through public engagement, we gather their views and experiences with these services. We ensure these perspectives are represented in decision-making processes both locally and nationally, driven by the belief that community feedback is vital to improving standards of care.

1.6 What is Enter and View?

As a local Healthwatch we are authorised to “Enter and View” health and social care services through the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007 and Local Authorities Regulations 2013 (part 4). These services can include hospitals, residential homes, GP practices, dental surgeries, optometrists, and pharmacies.

Enter and View visits are an opportunity to see services in action, listen to and understand the experiences of individuals who use them, and make recommendations where there are areas

for improvement. The visits are organised based on feedback received about individual services or in response to themes identified in our research.

2 Visit Summary

Conversations with staff

Healthwatch Cornwall spoke with the practice business & strategic partner, staff in the dispensary and reception staff

Conversations with patients

Patients attending the surgery to use the dispensary were asked about their experience of the department

Observation of facilities

Observations were made throughout the visit, focussing on the condition of the facilities, administrative procedures and patient experience.

3 Service Overview

The dispensary is located within the Probus surgery building and provides pharmacy dispensing services to patients registered with the practice. The dispensary provides services for approximately 9,500 patients. Prescription requests come into the dispensary in both electronic and paper form. Medications are dispensed from the surgery directly to patients and are also distributed within the community via a dedicated surgery transport service. There is a separate pharmacy on the site, which provides pharmacy first, general pharmacy and retail services to the public. The surgery is rated “Good” overall by Care Quality Commission (CQC).

4 Observations

The dispensary is located within the surgery building. Patients access dispensary services via a glass hatchway located on the outside of the building to speak to a member of the team. There is a large clear sign indicating the enquiry area. Patients queue outside the main surgery building, exposed to weather. This poses challenges for those with mobility difficulties,

wheelchair users, or patients with respiratory conditions. Currently there is only a small roof cover, which does not provide sufficient shelter or seating.

There is a push button bell outside the service hatch, which patients can use to call for attention. On the day of the visit, a member of the dispensing team was sat in the enquiry area. The enquiry area has a microphone/speaker system, a hearing loop and a sliding security draw to allow items to be passed between patients and the dispensary team.

There were several notices attached to the window of the dispensary, which contained information about length of wait for prescriptions, prescription charges, details of some specific drug shortages and a poster detailing where alternative treatment could be obtained. Some notices were no longer relevant, and others appeared overly detailed.

Inside, the dispensary area was clean and well lit. Staff appeared busy and were working calmly in tidy workstations. The dispensary area is adjacent to a clinical office workspace, and we observed several interactions between different staff groups, all of which appeared professional and courteous.

The staff member working at the enquiry station was polite to patients and was answering queries and handing out prescribed medication in between carrying out administrative duties. They took care to identify each patient by asking them to confirm their address and fielded queries regarding length of wait calmly and efficiently.

During the visit, the queue to speak to the dispensary was never more than two patients and the wait time did not exceed two minutes.

5 Patient Feedback

12 patients who used the dispensary were asked for their experience of the service.

Staff attitude

10 out of 12 patients we spoke with said that they were happy with the service that they had received. 7 complimented the staff, one saying they were 'Kind and lovely' another commented they were 'extremely helpful' and one referred to the staff member who had served them as 'an angel'.

Wait time for medication

8 patients said that they had problems with the length of wait for their medication in the past, but all said things had improved lately. One patient said, 'They sometimes don't have my wife's medicines ready when I come in'. Another said, 'It was a real problem back along at the start of summer, I had to wait weeks for my regular medication, but they sorted me out with the urgent ones the same day, I did have to keep coming back in though'.

Missing/unavailable prescription items

3 patients told us that they had experienced problems with missing prescription items. One said 'In the summer they forgot to put some of my medication in and I had to come back another day to get it' another said 'I came in June and they hadn't put everything in the bag but luckily I noticed' they went on to explain that they waited on site until it was sorted out and were given a seat inside and treated 'very kindly'. A patient who did not wish to give details of the specific problem they had encountered said 'They missed something but to be fair they sorted it out quickly and explained the pressures they were under'

One patient told us that the dispensary had run out of the drugs they had been prescribed but said 'They offered to speak to the Doctor there and then to get an alternative for me, they also said they could give me a paper to take to another chemist who might have it'

Telephone access

A couple who were both patients at the surgery told us that they had experienced problems being able to speak to the dispensary team a while ago. They said, 'The phones weren't being answered, and we had to drive all the way in just to see if our tablets were ready' They did however say that things had improved lately and that today 'The phone was picked up on the first ring' and added 'You could not wish for a better service now, the staff here look after us and make sure our tablets are ready when we need them, it's a great service'

Facilities

Two patients noted that they didn't like waiting outside when queuing to speak to the dispensing team, one saying 'The wind blows really hard down this way and it can get cold if you're waiting', another told us, 'They usually offer me to wait inside if it's raining but you don't always like to bother them'.

A parent who had brought their child in for treatment was redirected from the dispensary to the on-site pharmacy, as they were not a patient of the practice. They fed back to us 'I'm really happy with the service I received today, I don't even live here but they got me in to see the pharmacist and sorted my daughter out straight away, I was so worried, but everyone was so kind, it really helped'

6 Staff Feedback

Four staff members in the dispensary team offered feedback.

The first had been working at the dispensary for several years and told us 'Things were really difficult a few months ago and we were really behind, but we're all caught up now' They explained that on the day of the visit they were issuing medication for prescriptions written on the previous working day. They said that staffing issues, due to sickness, had caused problems some months ago but that the practice management team had been 'extremely supportive' and done all they could do to help, including physically manning the dispensary reception themselves.

Another staff member told us they had been at the practice for 12 years and that it was 'a fabulous place to work, with a genuinely caring team, I'm very happy here'. They reported that the management and clinical teams 'really look after us' and that they felt the dispensary service had fully recovered after some difficult times. They thought this recovery was due in the main to 'significant investment' in the team' which included bringing in locum staff until substantive staff returned from sick leave.

A more recently joined staff member told us that the practice had been 'very supportive' of them whilst studying for a dispensing qualification and they described the dispensary as 'busy, but a brilliant place to work' they added that 'the teams all get on really well and the managers are good at letting us know what is going on within the wider practice'

We were told by a member of the dispensary team that they had no stock of a commonly prescribed pain medicine available that day. This was apparently due to supply chain issues, and they were planning on contacting an alternate supplier the next day if stock had not arrived.

7 Manager Feedback

The managing partner was welcoming, open and honest and informed us that the dispensary had experienced significant challenges earlier in the year, specifically between April and June, due to staff absence through sickness and maternity leave. This had resulted in increased pressure and stress amongst the remaining staff. It also impacted on patient services and led to delays in issue of medication, incomplete prescription orders and problems with patients trying to contact the dispensary team by phone. They said that during this period they were up to 21 days behind in issuing prescribed medication.

Management response to this challenge was to allocate additional resource into the dispensing team, mainly in the form of agency workers and reallocation of staff, including management, to support the service.

They had informed the Care Quality Commission (CQC) of these issues. During this period the surgery had not recorded, or been made aware of, any instances of patient harm because of delay in issue of medication.

We were told that the situation had now resolved, with the team back to full staffing, and as a result, prescriptions were being issued in a timely manner, in all cases within five days but many being available the next working day. They informed us that the practice remained committed to supporting and building resilience within the dispensary team.

8 Recommendations

Healthwatch Cornwall have offered some recommendations based on observations and feedback from patients and staff to improve experiences with the service.

- 1) The practice should provide an indoor or sheltered seated waiting area (with at least 4 chairs) for patients queuing for medication, prioritising accessibility for those with reduced mobility. This action should be completed within the next 6 months.
- 2) Review the notices on display at the dispensary enquiry window and review or update as necessary. Out of date information can cause unnecessary anxiety for patients and detracts from other important messages. Also consider the content, print size and positioning of notices to make them more accessible and understandable for all patient groups.
- 3) Improve the checking process to ensure all prescribed items have been dispensed before the patient collects their medication. This will avoid unnecessary repeat visits to the dispensary and ensures that patients have the correct medication to manage their condition
- 4) Continually monitor the timeframe between a prescription being submitted and medication being ready for collection or delivery. This is to ensure medication is issued in a timely manner, will increase patient confidence in the service and ensure there is no delay in patients taking the necessary prescribed medication
- 5) Improve the mechanism for ensuring commonly prescribed medication stock levels are kept at acceptable levels, and source from alternate suppliers if necessary. This will avoid prescribing delays and means patients will not have to go to a different dispensary for their medication.

- 6) Regularly review dispensary staffing levels and plan for unexpected absences. Embed progression planning and development into practice business model to help retain staff, increase job satisfaction and reduce stress related absence.
- 7) Ensure that patients can contact the dispensary team by telephone during surgery hours, without extended waiting times. This is important for patients who may not have internet access or who are unable to attend in person. This ensures equality of healthcare availability for all patients.

9 Provider Response

Provider Response – Probus Surgery Dispensary

We would like to thank Healthwatch Cornwall for taking the time to visit Probus Surgery Dispensary and for providing valuable feedback and observations. We very much welcome this report and the opportunity to reflect on the progress we have made.

We fully acknowledge that earlier in the year the dispensary went through a very difficult period, due to unavoidable staff absences and operational pressures. This had a significant impact on dispensing times and prescription accuracy. However, we proactively addressed these issues through a combination of management support, additional staffing, and improved systems. We are pleased that, through a great deal of hard work by the whole team, the dispensary is now back to the high standards we and our patients expect. This improvement was already evident on the day of the Healthwatch visit, with minimal queues and prescriptions being dispensed promptly and accurately.

Recommendation 1 – Waiting area provision

We recognise the feedback regarding the lack of a sheltered outside waiting area. Unfortunately, due to previous incidents of antisocial behaviour, vandalism, and safety concerns, we are unable to provide permanent external sheltering. However, we will be introducing an indoor waiting area option for patients—particularly important during the winter months—to ensure those waiting are able to do so in a dry, safe, and comfortable environment.

Recommendation 2 – Information notices

We acknowledge that some of the notices displayed at the dispensary window were outdated or contained unnecessary detail. We have already reviewed and updated these to ensure all information is current, clear, and accessible. We are also ensuring that the font size, layout, and visibility of notices meet accessibility standards for all patients.

Recommendation 3 – Prescription checking process

We have reviewed and strengthened our checking procedures to ensure that all prescribed items are dispensed in full before the patient is contacted for collection. The issue of part supplies was primarily a consequence of the period when the dispensary was behind. We are now confident that the overwhelming majority of prescriptions are fully completed before patients are notified.

Recommendation 4 – Timeliness of dispensing

Delays in the issuing of prescriptions earlier in the year were a direct result of exceptional departmental pressures. Since catching up, and following successful recruitment and training of new staff, we have seen a significant improvement in turnaround times. Prescriptions are now dispensed in a timely manner, and we are delighted to see patient confidence returning to the service.

Recommendation 5 – Medication stock availability

We have strengthened our supply chain by establishing contracts with multiple leading pharmaceutical suppliers to ensure the best possible availability of medication. While occasional national supply issues are unavoidable, our improved stock management and proactive ordering now mean that we can act quickly to secure alternatives and minimise disruption to patients.

Recommendation 6 – Staffing resilience

We have undertaken a review of dispensary staffing levels and implemented improved contingency and succession planning. Training and development opportunities are being provided to support professional growth, improve job satisfaction, and enhance staff retention.

Recommendation 7 – Telephone access

Telephone access has been reviewed and improved. We continue to monitor response times and staffing cover to ensure patients can contact the dispensary easily during opening hours. Early feedback indicates that this is working well, and patients are already noticing the improvement.

In summary, we are proud of the progress the dispensary team has made and grateful to Healthwatch Cornwall for recognising these improvements. We remain committed to maintaining high standards of service, patient safety, and satisfaction for all who use our dispensary.

Probus Surgery

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