

# PRACTICE HEALTH CHAMPIONS –

## what they can mean for a General Practice



### Starting with the consultation

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The core of health care lies in the conversations that patients have with clinicians and other health care workers. A productive way to improve the whole health service would be to explore how it needs to organise itself if it is to support really good conversations.

GPs have put a great deal of effort over the last half-century into 'the consultation', and handle most consultations with great skill. But research commissioned by the Health Foundation<sup>1</sup> revealed that doctors as well as patients are dissatisfied with some consultations. In response the Right Conversation at the Right Time project (a group including GPs, patients and practice managers in Leeds) developed a 'consultation guide' to help patients navigate the consultation in a more effective way. And to support patients before and after their consultation, they took an asset-based approach to their practice list and drew on the resourcefulness of their local communities.

### Developing the volunteers

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The practices asked people on their list and from their local community to become involved with the practice, and receive training as health champions. Many said that they were honoured to be invited by the practice.

Over the last 5 years Altogether Better have used an award-winning evidence-based approach to recruit, train and support an astonishing resource of over 18,000 volunteers as community health champions.<sup>2</sup> They are encouraged to draw on their own passion to get people in the same situation and in their communities involved in healthy social activities, creating groups to meet local needs and signposting people to relevant support and services. These groups have enabled people to support each other in a wide range of ways including walking, cooking, breastfeeding and living with chronic conditions, as well as signposting each other to locally available support and services. The experience of behaviour change is that it is far more likely to come about and to be sustained when it is promoted and supported by a peer, 'someone like me', than by an expert or professional – and this is born out by the experience of the champions. As the champions succeed, they grow in confidence and magical things happen.

## Benefits for the practices and champions

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The connection between health champions and their general practice provides substantial benefits for both practice and champions. Champions, as they come to be recognised as members of the general practice team, gain a greater understanding of what the formal health and social care system has to offer, along with a more effective way of connecting people with needs into this system. The connection with general practice also strengthens their status as community leaders, increasing their effectiveness in their community.

For the practice, champions provide a link into their community and much greater knowledge of the resources available in it. The champions' groups provide a new resource. And many of the practice health champions are keen to work at the interface between the practice and the community, helping patients to make the best use of the services provided both by the practice and by the wider health and social care system. Champions work on issues that they feel passionate about and that are a priority to their practice.

Examples include explaining the roles of the various medical and nursing staff so patients can recognise for themselves whom it is most appropriate to see; and promoting practice campaigns such as flu immunisations. One practice explained to its group of champions that Asian women were not attending for cervical smears. One of the champions, a young woman, went to her imam who issued a fatwa explaining the need to have the test, which the practice now include with their invitation letters for smears. Shortly afterwards the champion had her first successful job interview.

This initiative offers the real opportunity to improve the quality of health care and reduce the workload in general practice; and ultimately to the development of citizen-led self-management groups and citizen involvement in commissioning.

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1. Martin Fischer & Gill Ereaut (2012) When doctors and patients talk: making sense of the consultation. London, Health Foundation
  2. J South, J White & G Raine (2010) Community health champions: Evidence summary. Leeds, Centre for Health Promotion Research

### For further information

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