

PATIENT COMMUNICATION IN A CHOICE-DRIVEN WORLD

Jennifer Chilver, Senior Account Director at Huntsworth Health, asks whether patient communication is not only an increasingly important part of the marketing mix but also the responsible approach for pharma

Choice is the buzz-word of the decade. Gone are the days of 'the expert knows best' as consumers face, and expect, increasingly more choice in every aspect of their daily lives.

- We used to buy a package holiday from a high-street travel agent; now we can use the internet to create the perfect mix of flights, cars and hotels
- We used to just order a coffee; now it can be a grande skinny cappuccino with a sprinkle of chocolate, or an iced mocha with cream
- We used to choose a TV at the local electronics store with the few options described by the Saturday boy; we are now faced with hundreds of brands that we can compare quickly and easily on price-comparison websites.

And patients are consumers too. The current focus on choice in the NHS means they are becoming ever more involved in decisions about their health, from the choice of possible medications, to where to receive their treatment.

A difficult choice

The 2005 British Social Attitudes survey revealed that 65% of patients wanted choice of treatment, and 63% wanted choice of hospital. Perhaps in response to patient demand, recent government initiatives have pushed patient power by emphasising choice and patient responsibility: the draft NHS Constitution includes rights to choose both treatment and provider, and amidst rising life expectancies and a focus on long-term conditions, Health Minister Professor Lord Ara Darzi proposes a pilot of individual health budgets to allow patients control over how NHS funding is used to support their care. This is to be lauded, but choices about health cannot be taken lightly.

Patients need support in making informed decisions, and there are worrying gaps in the information available to them. In fact, a recent survey found that while more than 80% of internet users had searched for health information, only 20% had found satisfactory answers. Given the internet's varied offering of information

– from reputable and not-so-reputable sources – should patient communication become an increasingly important part of the marketing mix? And is this the responsible approach for pharma to take?

Finding the right level

To avoid promotion to the public, any information provided to patients must be balanced, fact-based and objective. As an industry we have the opportunity to provide that information by communicating responsibly with patients to support them in making an informed treatment choice, and to continue this support throughout their therapy.

Patients' information needs

Research is essential to establish the specific needs of a group of patients, but patients also have a number of standard, more general information requirements. For example, when choosing a treatment, patients need credible, accurate and trustworthy information they can take time to consider. This includes information on:



- Their condition and the need for treatment
 - How to assess their needs and the importance of choosing the treatment option that best meets these needs
 - The details of the treatment options available
 - Potential consequences of non-treatment
 - Further information sources to support the decision-making process
 - Specific information for carers and families to support their involvement in the treatment decision.
- And it doesn't stop there. Once a patient has embarked on a course of treatment their need for information is arguably even greater. Compliance rates can drop rapidly post-prescription, even for life-threatening conditions. The concept of self-care is pivotal to the Department of Health's drive for a patient-led NHS, but in this new world of increased choice and patient

TOP TIPS FOR ENGAGING PATIENT COMMUNICATIONS OVER THE LONG TERM

- Content targeted and tailored to the patient's personal situation and needs
- Treatment tracking and reminders
- Frequent updates and regular new content
- The feel good factor
- Shared experiences and connectivity

empowerment patients may feel ever more confident in deciding for themselves whether they need – or can discontinue – their medication: a decision that can clearly be harmful. Patients with long-term or chronic conditions need – but often don't get – continued information, motivation and support.

This continued communication with patients should:

- Keep them informed about their condition
- Help them take more responsibility

- for their condition and its management
- Empower them to be actively involved in decisions regarding their condition
- Let them know they are not alone and allow them to share experiences with others
- Remind them why they are taking their medication
- If possible, show them how their condition has stabilised or improved since starting treatment
- Inform and involve carers and families
- Refer to further reliable information and support.

How should we communicate?

Effective communication with patients to support them in making their treatment decision may involve a one-off item, such as a website, printed item or DVD, delivered by the healthcare professional. But continued communication for long-term treatment is more difficult to get right.

The format in which information is communicated to patients should be considered carefully. We are increasingly turning to the web as the ideal communications medium but we should consider not only the age of our audiences and their access to the internet, but also how we can encourage them back to our site again and again as their treatment progresses.

Continued motivational patient communication over the long term requires engaging content coupled with a range of innovative delivery channels. If we get responsible patient communications right, we open the door to better relationships with the general public, healthcare professionals and, most importantly, our end-users, the patients.

At Huntsworth Health, we have seen patient communications becoming an increasingly greater priority for our clients. If you would like to know more about our strong expertise and experience in this area, or discuss how patient communications can support your brand strategy, then please email jenniferchilver@hhealth.com.