

Simple Telehealth in Weight Management – the Edinburgh Experience

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Background

The NHS Lothian weight management service is based in Edinburgh and provides a community based specialist service to the population of Lothian (c.900,000). Patients with a BMI>30kg/m² seeking treatment for obesity can be referred into a programme of treatment for 1 year which is delivered in each local area. Our weight management programme is group-based, incorporating dietary information, physical activity and behavioural change components. As part of continuing evaluation of our service we wanted to explore:

How acceptable is a telehealth intervention in our patient group?

Can we enhance self-management and obtain better outcomes?

How can this happen with minimal additional resources?

We proposed to pilot the use of Florence (FLO) Simple Telehealth to provide this added support intervention.

Method

All patients attending a weight loss maintenance (WLM) group in Edinburgh City and West Lothian in the month of October 2015 were given the opportunity to opt into the Florence pilot (n=36). Initially, around 90% (33) of the patients expressed interest in the scheme and provided their mobile number, of which 60% (20) went on to take part in the pilot in full. Using existing simple telehealth templates, the weight management team adapted these and devised a bespoke protocol. Patients were divided randomly into 2 groups; group A received 3 motivational texts per week and group B received the same 3 motivational texts plus the facility of reporting their weights at home on a weekly basis using their own scales. The time scale was set for 8 weeks for the purpose of the initial pilot and every patient was encouraged to also attend their monthly WLM group. Examples of the motivational texts are:

“When exercising you should be able to talk but not sing”

“Look after yourself – You’re important!”

“Physical activity can help reduce depression and help control anxiety”

Results

There was a 60% completion rate at the 8 week stage of the pilot, compared to 50% completion rate in the standard programme. Average weight loss over 8 weeks is shown below:

Flo WLM Group A	1.2kg
Flo WLM Group B	1.3kg
Standard programme	1.3kg

A few quotes from patients in the pilot:

“I was about to get something from the fridge and a text message came through. It made me stop and think do I actually need this....NO! So I walked away”

“I thought the weight management team had fitted a camera in my kitchen as I went for a snack and my phone pinged, It made me laugh”

“I don’t go home after a group session now and forget about my weight until the next date”

Discussion

The aim at the outset was to test if an additional intervention in the way of simple telehealth would improve weight loss, engagement and patient experience and to explore the acceptance of new technology within the Weight Management Service. From the initial pilot, patient feedback has been overwhelmingly positive, with 85% of patients reporting that they liked using Flo as part of their weight management programme and 83% would recommend using Flo for additional support when on the Weight Management programme. A greater number of patients using Flo completed the programme when compared to standard care but this may be due to those opting for Flo being more motivated in general. Weight loss outcomes over the 8 week period were not statistically different between all three groups but a longer term pilot period with more patients would allow us to add more data to this. There is potential here to continue support with weight loss over a longer period of time with increased text-based support rather than clinician led group-programmes, providing the ability to extend the programme to the evidence based 2 years.

Areas for improvement in an extended pilot include eliminating any unforeseen call charges and improving the user demonstration session with more information which we hope would further increase uptake, engagement and retention.

Conclusion

The Florence Simple Telehealth pilot in the Lothian Weight Management Service was a demonstrably positive experience for both patients and clinicians. The system is user-friendly, safe and well accepted in our patient group. Weight loss outcomes were similar to standard care and an extension of the pilot will show if this changes over time with greater numbers of patients. Most importantly for us, our patients reported feeling more connected, better supported and more mindful in their weight loss treatment.

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