How we've created a 'digital eco-system' for patients

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A quiet revolution is taking place across North Staffordshire as part of a programme to develop a 'digital eco-system' to enhance the services provided to patients. Our digital programme is tasked with increasing the number of patients who are accessing GP services online as well as improving the skills and knowledge amongst staff and patients with long-term conditions to manage their condition digitally.

The concept of our 'digital eco-system' is an exciting one as it is multi-faceted involving partnerships from across the health economy. It is also focused in three key areas:

1. Technological infrastructure
2. Staff culture and development
3. Patient upskilling

We don't focus on one above the other as to achieve a true digital ecosystem you need all three. There is no point rolling out new tech if the skillsets contained within the practice or hospital ward teams are not developed. Similarly, you can have all the staff and patient enthusiasm and skills you like but you can't progress if the buildings have poor wifi or antiquated equipment.

We're aiming to increase uptake and demand for digital delivery of care from those patients who use their GP services most. We've already been running digital upskilling sessions with patients with asthma and diabetes, with those attending going on to sign up to patient online access as soon as they were shown the benefits it can bring to them. We've also had great support from Keele Medical School where medical students on community placements have been engaging with patients in practices, hand holding them as they learn to manage access to their records, prescriptions and appointments online.

In northern Staffordshire, we have a long track record of developing the use of digital delivery of care in our GP practices. We now have over 60 practices out of 81 regularly using social media to engage with patients with new practices coming on stream all the time. We are now about to launch a major digital training programme with patient participation groups who they will work with the practice team to support patients to use digital services more as well as using social media to recruit new

members. Our existing social media network offers a fantastic way to communicate with patients about online access. We can send them links to sign up, provide them with step by step guides on how to register as well as raise awareness of face to face engagement sessions to sign patients up that may be taking place in practices. We are currently measuring the impact in sign ups linked to social media marketing.

Our practices have been using telehealth for a while now and some of the most digitally enabled are introducing the use of apps to help patients manage a number of long term conditions. Sitting alongside this work, at Royal Stoke University Hospital we've been using closed Facebook groups to support patients with long term conditions which are very popular with patients and most importantly are being moderated and supported regularly by clinicians.

In addition to all of this we are now driving a [programme of Skype consultations](). These have been developed on the back of considerable work on governance and medical indemnity and we're at a point where we have identified the most effective areas for adopting video consultations., for example nursing homes, medication follow ups and multidisciplinary team meetings. There are considerable barriers that have to be overcome but with will power and leadership within the system we are overcoming the inertia that exists across the NHS and making a real difference on the ground. The creation of our technology enabled care 'code of practice' provides the support and reassurance clinicians and practice managers need before adopting technology and this is supported further through our professional learning website that has been created to showcase best practice.

We believe by adopting this approach, we will be ahead of the curve when it comes to getting more of our patients online. We are also developing a 'kite mark' through our digital health academy which practices and clinicians can aspire to with the ambition to create a network of 'digital practices' underpinned by a health economy wide 'digital eco-system'.

The journey hasn't been easy, and as is often the case we've had to be creative with the little funds we've had. However, we feel in northern Staffordshire we are on the verge of something very special and most importantly something that can be replicated across the UK.

Dr Ruth Chambers is chair of NHS Stoke on Trent CCG and Marc Schmid is director of Redmoor Health Limited and they are authors of 'Digital Health – The essential guide'