

The NHS is in crisis and startups hold the key to rapid first-line treatment

Daily, the British public is being reminded that the NHS is in crisis. The most recent figures at the time of writing put the number of people on a waiting list for hospital treatment at 5.6 million. Many are expecting to wait 12 to 18 months to be seen, and whilst COVID-19 has had an impact, it has exacerbated an issue that already existed.

In July, new Health Secretary Sajid Javid warned that the NHS waiting lists backlog could reach 13 million. From staff cuts and lack of new talent to shortages due to staff catching COVID-19, the NHS is under an enormous amount of pressure. But patients waiting for treatment also have to live with their health issues for longer. Whether they're awaiting a hip replacement or cataract surgery, treatment won't come quickly and it is impacting their lives. For those that can afford to, there has been a sharp increase in turning to private healthcare, turning treatment into a postcode lottery.

Clearly, this is a gigantic and complex problem that affects many people across the board and there won't be a silver bullet for fixing it. That said, there is a way to help alleviate some of the pressure on the NHS while helping patients — and better yet, it's available right now.

Slowing down the growth of the waiting list

Getting ahead of the future problem and doing more to keep waiting lists from growing, whilst managing existing patients, is crucial. This is where technology is part of the answer – providing scalable, digital solutions that enable thousands of patients to benefit, wherever they are. There are thousands of startups around the world building health tech to help a wide range of health concerns. From digital therapy for mental health to memory banks for dementia, and fertility trackers to physiotherapy, the tools are already there to help the NHS and patients alike.

Digital means scale

Joint Academy was built on the same principles. Using digital as a way to provide evidence-based first-line treatment for back and chronic joint pain, at scale. We started working on our digital physiotherapy clinic in Sweden in 2014 and have seen some incredible results and changes to patients' lives by making treatment available to them through their phones.

In the UK, chronic joint pain costs the NHS £10.2B each year. It's a major contributor to the NHS waiting list due to a combination of joint replacement surgeries and patients typically having to go to a physiotherapy clinic to start first-line treatment. Once patients in the first-line treatment track have had an initial visit to the physiotherapy clinic, they're expected to continue the treatment on their own. But patient compliance without access to a physiotherapist is low, which results in worsening symptoms — leading many patients to ending up on the surgery waiting list when it could have been avoided.

It's little surprise that Joint Academy, which allows instant start and gives patients constant access to their physiotherapist and treatment through their phone, has a higher success rate than traditional face-to-face treatment.

Researchers from the University of Nottingham found in a randomised controlled trial that patients using Joint Academy reduced their pain by 41% after six weeks, compared to only 6% of patients in traditional treatment. We're able to send digital daily reminders to patients to complete their exercises, show them videos to complete exercises correctly, and connect them to a registered physiotherapist that is available to support the patient throughout their treatment — regardless of where the patient is. All things that traditional treatment is unable to do.

And it's not just that one trial that shows how effective the digital treatment is — a total of nine peer reviewed studies show that Joint Academy patients reduce their pain, change their minds about surgery, and quit painkillers.

An expanding opportunity

We've had great success in helping support chronic joint pain patients, and I know there are countless other startups out there doing something similar to combat other illnesses and health concerns, and seeing phenomenal results. The opportunity for digital health startups to support the NHS is nothing new — it's only getting bigger. But whilst startups can move quickly and are ready to support healthcare systems around the world, red tape makes things slower.

In 2017 the NHS App Library was launched, after an initial App Library that closed in 2015. In 2018, to celebrate 70 years of the NHS, just 70 applications were recommended on the service — a service which is also widely unknown amongst the public. Three years on, and the criteria and vetting process has changed once more. Apparently, the App Library is also on its way out again.

Clearer criteria and collaboration

There absolutely should be processes and standards to vet and approve new solutions into public healthcare systems — but they also need to be able to move things along faster to serve public health quicker, and not inhibit innovation that has the potential to alleviate some of the pressure on the NHS while helping people to get better.

The caricature of massive, bureaucratic organisations is that they are often slow to change and unresponsive to the agents of change. But we saw during the COVID-19 response that this doesn't need to be the case. The NHS has a fantastic ability to adapt when it needs to, so we know that opening the channels of communication that could enable health-tech innovators to operate on the national stage is a surmountable challenge — and it would have a hugely positive impact on both the NHS and the people it caters to.

The NHS is a wonderful service for all of us in the UK and it pulled through during the pandemic. Now is the time to open up and allow for the support that evidence-based healthcare startups can deliver to the NHS and its patients.

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