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LONG PHONE WAIT TIMES AT NEWTOWN PRIMARY CARE

Krystal Gopaul, Family Medicine Sept/Oct 2022

DIFFICULTIES ACCESSING APPOINTMENTS AT NEWTOWN PRIMARY CARE

- A lack of primary care physicians (PCP) is often one of the most common reasons why patients cannot get an appointment with their PCP however, at Nuvance Health's Newtown Primary Care office patients often cite additional concerning factors
- During visits, patients often stated that it was extremely difficult to call and book an appointment so much so that PCPs began ensuring that patients booked a return to clinic appointment before leaving, as to avoid the hassle of calling the front desk
- Patient's frequent concerns about calling and booking an appointment at Newtown Primary Care and the responsive shift in provider behavior suggests that the phone system at Newtown Primary Care may be a significant barrier in access to care

PURPOSE OF THIS PROJECT

- This project aims to investigate wait times when calling Newtown Primary Care as well as identify other barriers patients experience when booking an appointment. Furthermore, this project will gain insight into the perspectives of patients, PCPs and administrative staff at Newtown Primary Care regarding booking an appointment over the phone, overall access to primary care and ways we can make it easier for patients to see their PCP.

OUR INAPPROPRIATE HEALTH CARE SPENDING

- The cost of health care in the US is out of control with costs in 2020 reaching \$4.1 billion, the highest of all developed countries. Despite this, the US continues to have the worst health care outcomes of all developed countries.
- Access to primary care is a significant issue due a lack of PCPs, short appointment times, inflexible schedules, a lack of interest in primary care by medical students and a lack of prioritization of preventative care by Americans.
- With the numerous systemic issues plaguing primary care we simply cannot afford other local office specific concerns



Although the United States spends more on healthcare than other developed countries, its health outcomes are generally not any better



SOURCE: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, *OECD Health Statistics 2022*, July 2022.
NOTES: Data are not available for all countries for all metrics. Data are for 2020 or latest available.

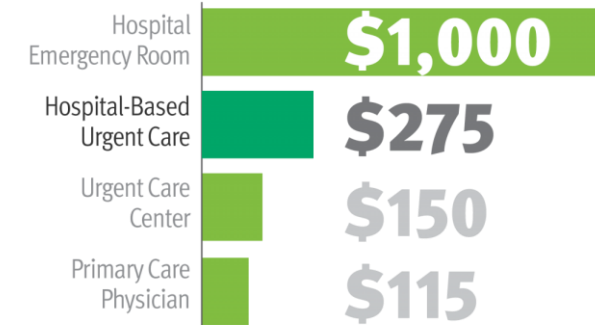
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THE LACK OF FOCUS ON PRIMARY AND PREVENTATIVE CARE

- One of the most concerning factors is our lack of PCPs. This lack of PCPs makes it very difficult for patients for patients to get an appointment especially for acute concerns thus, forcing them to go to urgent care clinics.
- While urgent care clinics help fill a health care need, these visits are more expensive than a PCP visit. Typical reimbursements for urgent care are \$110 vs \$90 in primary care. This perpetuates our vicious cycle of health care overspending without improving outcomes.
- If long wait times over the phone at Newtown Primary Care are also impacting local access to care, then perhaps this can be a solution we can tackle ourselves and significantly improve access to primary care in our community.

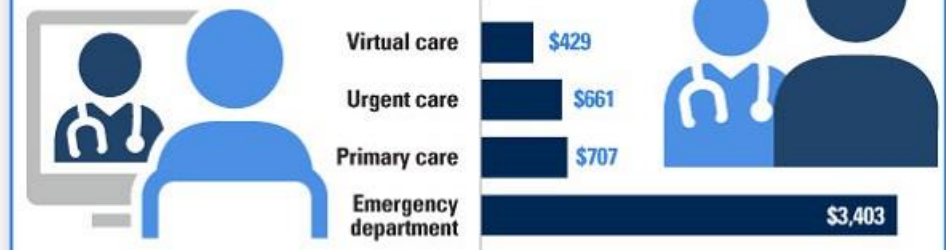
Average Cost to Treat Bronchitis*



* Amounts quoted are averages, based on actual charges by area facilities

Costs of virtual care vs. traditional settings for low-acuity urgent conditions

(April 2016-March 2017)



Source: "Virtual vs. traditional care settings for low-acuity urgent conditions: An economic analysis of cost and utilization using [SelectHealth] claims data," Journal of Telemedicine and Telecare online, July 25, 2019

THE NEWTOWN PRIMARY CARE PERSPECTIVE

METHODOLOGY AND INTERVIEWS

- To better understand the phone system concerns at Newtown Primary Care, patients, providers and front desk administrative staff were interviewed to gather a well-rounded perspective and guide the development of an intervention.
- Three Medical Practice Patient Representatives who answer the phones and work at the front desk, two patients of varying ages and one family physician were interviewed. Each group was asked tailored questions to better elicit their concerns and perspective.
- Historic phone call wait times were also gathered for a two-week period in September 2022 to compare to industry standards

MEDICAL PRACTICE PATIENT REPRESENTATIVE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What is the process to book an appointment over the phone?
2. What do you think about your workload?
3. How many hours do you work in a day? How many days in a week? How long is your lunch break?
4. What is the demeanor of patients on the phone?
5. When do you feel is the best time for patients to call? Why?
6. When do you feel is the worst time for patients to call? Why?
7. Any there any staffing issues at Newtown Primary Care?
8. What do you think we can do to improve wait times?
9. Anything else you would like to add

PATIENT INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. How do you book your appointments?
2. Do you find it difficult to book appointments with your PCP? Why?
3. Where do you go if you have an acute medical need?
4. How do you get in touch with your PCP?
5. Is it easy to get in touch with your PCP?
6. Did you know that you could self book appointments online?
7. Do you know what the Nuvance portal system is?
8. Are you signed up for the Nuvance portal?
9. If yes to Q8, are you able to access your messages?
10. If yes to Q8, what do you use the Nuvance portal for? Do you use it regularly? Is it easy to use?
11. What can we do to make it easier for you to book an appointment?
12. What can we do to make it easier for you to get in touch with your PCP?

FAMILY PHYSICIAN INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. How many total patients do you have?
2. Have your patients expressed any difficulties booking appointments with you?
3. What kind of concerns have they expressed?
4. How do you help your patients book appointments with you?
5. Do your patients use the Nuvance portal? What percentage?
6. What do your patients usually use the Nuvance portal for?
7. What can we do to make it easier for patients to book appointments with you and get in touch with you in general?

MEDICAL PRACTICE PATIENT REPRESENTATIVE INTERVIEW RESULTS

1. Process to book an appointment - Phone calls go directly to us at front desk
2. Workload
 - Varies, it's not overwhelming but we are busy from the time we get here to the time we leave. Workload is good when we are fully staffed.
3. Patient demeanor over the phone
 - Varies, most patients are anxious to get an appointment and get their medical needs met. 80-85% of patients are anxious.
 - In the morning patients are more frustrated as we are busier and wait times can be over 5 min. Patients can also be upset if we are playing phone tag about lab results etc or if something is not done like a refill.
4. Newtown Staffing Issues
 - Yes, there are staffing issues. Fully staffed we are six people but there are never six people here. One person is on maternity leave and one other person is usually on vacation or out sick so it's usually four people covering the phones, check in and check out. Only one person is dedicated to the phones. When we are very short staffed, the medical assistants (MA) do help out. 2 MAs are trained on the phones and will help when needed. Also, if an MA's provider is not in the office then they will help on the phones for at least half a day which is great!
5. Best and worst time to call
 - The best time to call is 10 am to 12 pm and 2 to 4 pm. Worst time to call 8 to 10 am and 4 to 4:30 pm. This is the time when we opening and closing and get the most phone calls
6. What we can do to improve wait times on the phone
 - More staff, dedicated phone lines for each provider could help

PATIENT INTERVIEW RESULTS

1. How do you book appointments with your PCP
 - On the phone
2. Difficulty booking an appointment with PCP and why
 - Yes, it is difficult to book an appointment because of the demeanor staff over the phone. Staff are not pleasant. Wait times are also long sometimes and it's difficult to get an appointment that is not a few months away. If I have an urgent need I might not even call and go directly to urgent care.
3. Communicating with PCP
 - Uses phone, it is difficult to get in touch with PCP
4. Nuvance Portal Use
 - Is signed up but prefers to call. Rarely uses the portal but when does it is easy. Does not have issues accessing messages
5. Making it easier to book an appointment with PCP
 - More available appointments, longer hours, more customer service training for front desk staff, more staff in general
6. Awareness of online self scheduling tool
 - Heard of it but never used it

FAMILY PHYSICIAN INTERVIEW RESULTS

1. Common concerns expressed from patients

- Never get to see own PCP, long wait times on the phones, only gets an appointment a few months out, never in a timely fashion

2. Nuvance Portal Use

- Some patients do but it's the minority

3. Making it easier for patients to book appointments

- I always make sure my patients have a return to clinic order before leaving so they can book an appointment the same day and avoid the hassle. I do this regularly even if patients may not always need a follow up. It is easier for them to just cancel the appointment than to try and book a follow up appointment at a later time.

NEWTOWN PRIMARY CARE PHONE WAIT TIMES 9/15/2022 TO 9/30/2022

Date	Wait Time (min)
9/15/2022	2.93
9/16/2022	3.30
9/19/2022	3.48
9/20/2022	3.52
9/21/2022	1.66
9/22/2022	1.05
AVERAGE WAIT TIME: 2.46 MIN	

Date	Wait Time (min)
9/23/2022	2.53
9/26/2022	11.58
9/27/2022	2.30
9/28/2022	1.35
9/29/2022	1.55
9/30/2022	1.96
AVERAGE WAIT TIME: 3.32 MIN	

- Best practices regarding phone wait times in customer service from the International Finance Corporation – World Bank Group
 - 80% of calls should be answered in **20 seconds (0.33 min)**
 - The average speed to answer a call should be **28 seconds (0.46 min) or less**

INTERVENTION

- Clearly, phone wait times at Newtown Primary Care are too long according to the historic data, best practices and patient and provider perspectives.
- Unfortunately, staffing issues are the main cause of the issue and is related to organization policies and maternity leave. Little can be done to address this at the moment. That being said, calls can be redistributed to times which historically receive a lower call volume. In addition, call volumes can be decreased by encouraging patients to use the Nuvance Patient Portal and Online Self Scheduling tool for communication and to book appointments.
- A 5 x 7 inch double sided information card was developed with this focus for distribution to all Newtown Primary Care patients
- The front of the information card outlines the best times to call Newtown Primary Care and encourages patients to sign up for and use the Nuvance Portal as well as details some of its uses
- The back of the information card will introduce the Nuvance online self scheduling system and encourage patients to book their annual physical exams online. A detailed step by step process on booking an annual physical exam will be outlined.
- The annual physical exam was chosen as a focus as it is the appointment that is likely most easily booked by patients and would require minimal adjustments by staff.
- This information card will be printed in color, on card stock and be distributed by medical assistants during visits and by staff at check out.

FRONT SIDE OF 5 X 7 IN INFORMATION CARD

Booking an appointment with your Primary Care Provider

*We know it can be difficult to book an appointment with your PCP,
but we want to help change that!*

BEST TIMES TO CALL NEWTOWN PRIMARY CARE

10 AM TO 12 PM AND 2 TO 4 PM

*Need to check test results, request a refill or
send a message to your PCP?
Try the Nuvance Health Portal!
Login or Sign up here and use our My
Nuvance Health Blue App*



BACK SIDE OF 5 X 7 IN INFORMATION CARD

Need to book your annual physical exam?

Try the Nuvance Health online self scheduling tool to book a 30 min in person visit!

- 1 Visit: <https://findcare.nuvancehealth.org>
- 2 Type in the name of your provider
- 3 Select Request Appointment, then Book Online
- 4 Choose YES for have you seen this clinician before
- 5 Under 65 years: Select *I am well and need an Annual Physical (Non Medicare)*
65 years and over: Select *I am well and need an Annual Physical Visit (Age 65+)*
- 6 Find an appointment time that works for you!

Can't find an appointment that works for you or having difficulties?
Call Newtown Primary Care at
(203) 426 1818



PROJECT LIMITATIONS

- Small sample size - would have liked to do more interviews in general especially with patients and the practice manager and of patients who used the Nuvance Portal. Of the patients I interviewed none of them actively used the Portal. Interviewing patients of different providers would have also provided richer data
- The practice manager was not interviewed due to time constraints and would have been an extremely important perspective
- Exclusively interviewing patients over age 45 would have provided more fruitful data as they interact with the healthcare system the most
- Real time data from patients calling the office as well as real time data when staff answer the phone would have been more accurate. Wait times broken down by time of day which also have been ideal in guiding intervention development. Furthermore, a self call test of wait times conducted myself would have provided good data
- Currently, Newtown Primary Care is understaffed at only four employees. Results may have been different during a fully staffed situation
- Unfortunately, certain things like staffing policies and whether or not a provider is accepting new patients is out of staff control. As such, there is minimal local control over patient loads and staffing coverage. This will always negatively skew the results

PROPOSED PROJECT EVALUATION

- Evaluation would be done six months after intervention implementation
- The intervention information card would be distributed to all patients. Interviewed patients would then be reinterviewed in six months with a focus on phone wait times, easy of booking appointments, perception of PCP access, use of Nuvance Patient Portal and overall patient satisfaction.
- Phone wait times and call volumes at five different time intervals (8:15-10 am, 10 am-2 pm, 12-2 pm, 2-4 pm and 4-4:30 pm) prior to intervention implementation and 6 months after would be compared to determine if there were any statistically significant differences.
- Patient satisfaction scores collected by Nuvance Health prior to intervention implementation and 6 months after would also be compared to determine if there were any statistically significant differences

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE INTERVENTIONS AND PROJECTS

1. Nuvance Health has multiple primary care offices outside of Newtown. In the future, data can be collected from other primary care offices especially those which are understaffed or have poor patient satisfaction scores. This system wide data can then be used for system wide interventions
2. Another key concern is access to Nuvance PCPs. There is a lack of PCPs across the country however, interventions can be implemented at Nuvance Health to increase our number of PCP including exploring provider recruitment strategies and medical student recruitment. Nuvance Health has medical students from Ross University, AUC and UVM thus there are multiple opportunities to recruit these students to family medicine and Nuvance Health.
3. Further education can be done on when patients should call their PCP vs go to Urgent Care vs the ED. This can help decrease inappropriate primary care phone calls and visits.
4. Lastly, a major area which I feel Nuvance can explore is the use of their online self scheduling tool. The Nuvance self scheduling tool is not very well designed and only allows for patients to book 30 min physicals, 15 min telehealth appointments and 15 min acute visits. Unfortunately, patients do not know what qualifies as a 15 min vs 30 min appointment nor what concerns qualify for telehealth vs an in person visit. More often than not, staff need to call self-scheduled patients to fix their appointments, adding to their workload. The self scheduling system needs to be better designed. Awareness of the self scheduling tool also appears to be low.



INTERVIEW CONSENT FORM

Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed. This project is a requirement for the Family Medicine clerkship. It will be stored on the Dana Library ScholarWorks website. Your name will be attached to your interview, and you may be cited directly or indirectly in subsequent unpublished or published work. The interviewer affirms that he/she has explained the nature and purpose of this project. The interviewee affirms that he/she has consented to this interview.



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