An accessible website to boost independence in young people with physical impairments

Young people must be given support in the transition to adult services. A scheme enables those with physical disabilities to access a wide range of information.

The team consists of three case managers: two of us were previously paediatric physiotherapists and one was a paediatric nurse. Our role is to improve the pathway to adult services, enabling young people to have timely access to appropriate support, as recommended by the National Transition Support Programme (www.transitionsupportprogramme.org.uk).

The Department of Health (2004) established clear standards for young people to be supported in the transition to adulthood in order to achieve their maximum potential in terms of education, health, development and wellbeing.

Young people are encouraged to take responsibility for their own health and make informed choices. Like every young person, our service users expect to get instant access to information and to have questions on key issues answered almost immediately. It was clear the team needed to be more creative in how we provided information.

Many questions raised by the young people were unique and we often scoured the internet in search of information or answers, which was time consuming. We realised the young people would find it physically challenging to access this information themselves – for example, a search resulted in a list of small text links, which someone with fine motor control difficulties would not be able to use. In addition, when young people searched independently, they could be directed to inappropriate sites.

A consortium of government departments identified several steps that should be taken urgently (Prime Minister’s Strategy Unit et al, 2005), notably the provision of easier access to advice and information so all disabled people and their families could understand their entitlements and rights.

With this in mind, the team concluded that building an accessible website dedicated to the key issues raised by our clients would be the solution. This was reinforced by a government white paper, Equality and Excellence: Liberating the NHS (DH, 2010), which outlined the need to develop new ways for patients to communicate with their clinicians online.

Extensive research by the team failed to identify an accessible signposting site, and it would be expensive to write one from scratch. NHS Walsall Community Health managers supported the idea and were willing to let us develop the project in work time, but did not have the financial capacity to fund any technical work. We became aware of the Queen’s Nursing Institute Fund for Innovation, which provides small grants...
for innovative projects. After submitting an application, then having an interview in July 2009, we were one of the 10 projects awarded a grant. We were given 12 months to complete the project.

PROJECT AIDS
The aim was to enable young people in Walsall with complex physical impairments to become independent in accessing web based information. As the site was created with both young people and professionals, it is called Transition Together.

The website themes were modelled on the team’s holistic assessment to cover general health, specific health conditions, money and benefits, education and work. Other themes include independent living, leisure activities, sexual health, psychological health, aids and adaptations, communication, mobility and transport. Most of the information is national, although the team has added links to local health and social services.

We decided to link to specific pages on local and national websites. This addressed the issue of not having the financial capability to create the information pages from scratch and made sure the young people could instantly access information without long searches and repeated clicks. The disadvantage was that we had no control over changes that outside agencies made to their web pages or addresses. However, by having protected administration time to check all the links on a weekly basis, we ensure the site remains active and current, in line with DH criteria (DH, 2007).

On the recommendation of the QNI, the team chose Agent8 Design Limited to build the site. We held two events with the web developer and invited service users from the Health Transition Team and Walsall’s Centre for Independent Living to try out the site. The test pilot site was created as a result of the first event; the second event enabled the site to be adapted to meet a range of needs including those of people with dyslexia and visual and physical impairments.

Both events were successful and the feedback helped develop the site and improve its functionality. Key points for developing a site for this client group are summarised in Box 1. Data on the use of the website is outlined in Table 1 and Box 2. In September 2010 the number of users returning was 17.7%, compared with an increased percentage of 43.0% in October. We believe this shows those using the site are finding it useful and are returning in order to access more information. That more people accessed the site in September than October may reflect the fact that it was launched and heavily promoted during this period.

PROJECT CHALLENGES
The team found the most challenging part of the project was making sure we communicated and negotiated effectively with all the agencies involved. We had to meet key people in the trust to negotiate how and why the site needed to be standalone and in a different, more accessible format from the trust’s own site.

We were also challenged by having no control over external sites, which sometimes ceased to work. It was important to have control of the content management system and be able to change the links.

CONCLUSION
This innovative project has created a unique online signposting portal to a variety of information sources in an accessible format.

The website was built successfully through user involvement and regular consultations with young people – its quality is a direct result of their participation. As the idea was to empower and enable young people, it was vital to involve them from the outset. The two consultation days ensured the engagement and we updated them face to face and through networking events and newsletters.

Young people were invited to a photo shoot and could have their picture on the site if they wished. Each experience was positive and inspiring, reaffirming that the website project would help support many people and give them access to the information they needed.

For further information visit
www.healthtransition-walsall.nhs.uk

REFERENCES

Department of Health (2007) You’re Welcome Quality Criteria: Making Health Services Young People Friendly. tinyurl.com/you-rewelcomeequalitycriteria
Department of Health (2006) Transition: Getting It Right for Young People: Improving the Transition of Young People with Long Term Conditions from Children’s to Adult Health Services. tinyurl.com/gettingitrighptyoungpeople
Department of Health and Department for Children Schools and Families (2008) Aiming High for Disabled Children Transforming Services for Disabled Children and their families. tinyurl.com/aiminghighfordisabledchildren
Prime Minister’s Strategy Unit et al (2005) Improving the Life Chances of Disabled People. tinyurl.com/improving-life-chances