Optimising the Depression Pathway Enabled by Novel Digital Assessment Technology

Background

In the United Kingdom, one in six people aged 18 or over report symptoms of a common mental health problem such as anxiety or depression. The best ways for GP practices to support people with depression are not fully understood. However, new digital technologies are being created to help, which include apps for desktops, mobile phones and tablets.

A research study, funded by Innovate UK, was carried out at GP surgeries in Faversham, Kent. The study tried to understand if **a new 'walk-in' clinic for people with low mood, anxiety and depression** could help people recover better and sooner. This was piloted for one year and the **clinic provided people with a range of therapy options** including medication, counselling and lifestyle advice alongside **i-spero©, an app designed to support people to manage their depression** and help professionals track progress.
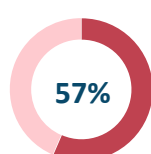
Aims

The clinic was evaluated by a team of researchers from the University of Kent, who aimed to understand how well the clinic was working, whether those using the clinic had a good care experience, whether their symptoms and wellbeing improved and how much the clinic cost.
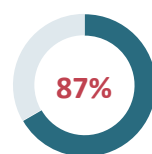
Findings
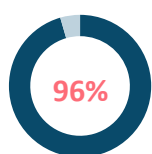
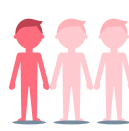**96%** of people using the new clinic were happy with the care received

57% of people using the new clinic said it exceeded their expectations
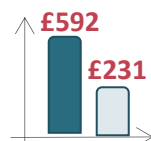
87% of people using the new clinic would use i-spero© again

two thirds of people experienced improvement in their condition

one third of people recovered from their condition within six months

£592 **£231** per-person average total cost of health and care services are higher for those who used the clinic than those who did not

Study Design

The service evaluation followed a mixed methods, observational feasibility study design to identify changes regarding implementation, impact and resource use, the effects on user outcomes and experiences, plus the experience of healthcare professionals. NICE evidence standards framework for digital health technologies was employed. The study comprised an intervention group of service users (n=109) who received six months' care from the new service, compared to a standard care group (n=48).

Service users and staff said

"I felt that I was getting someone's complete attention who understood the nuances of my condition and had the time to think about it. I think that worked"
(Service User 20)

"I can safely say [my improvement] is absolutely down to accessing the clinic because I've now got the tools and the access and the support that I think I need"
(Service User 45)
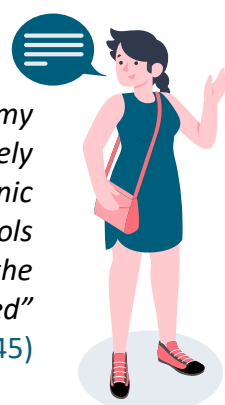
"You just need to look at the scores and you can see people are improving… I think that's actually boosting the confidence of the staff because they can all see that, and it makes them feel proud that they are helping people"
(Operational Staff Focus Group)

"[The i-spero© technology] clinically improves my management. I do think people get better quicker when we use it, absolutely. I've got quite a lot of examples of that"
(Clinic Staff Member 01)

Conclusions

After 6 months, people using the new clinic felt significantly better than people who attended standard GP appointments, demonstrating the effectiveness and impact of the new depression pathway enhanced by novel digital technology. There was a greater rate of severe depression in the locality than the national average and the new clinic provided help to local people with low mood and anxiety

The evaluation also provided a list of 'active elements' enabling clinic provision and noted aspects of the new service that could be further improved, should be sustained and can be replicated when creating similar services elsewhere.

The findings and recommendations have been fed back to the GP practices and shared widely to help plan future support of this kind for people with low mood, anxiety and depression. The clinic has gained additional funding to continue to support people with mental health conditions during the COVID-19 pandemic.