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Media release

Prescriptions available around the clock in Shere – thanks to an automated dispensary machine called Brenda

Waiting times and restricted hours are a thing of the past at Shere Surgery where a Pharmaself24 robot (affectionately named Brenda) has been making it easier and more convenient for patients to collect their prescriptions.

Brenda – an automated prescription collection device – was installed at the surgery last month, as a solution to the problem of queuing during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Explains Dr Emma Watts from the surgery: “At the start of the lockdown in March there was a feeling of panic from some of our patients who were anxious about running out of medication. People were flocking to our dispensary and we found we had a huge queue of people going down the street, all at a two metre distance.

“We have a lot of elderly patients and so having them queueing wasn’t ideal, and we couldn’t put out seating because we didn’t have the resources to clean the seats between patients. I also saw the same thing outside other pharmacies when I drove home after work.”

Emma and her colleagues set about coming up with a solution and researched all of the options available. They decided an automated prescription service would offer patients greater flexibility, reduced waiting times and increased safety.

The surgery spoke to its patient participation group, SALV (Shere and Local Villages Charity) which was in favour of the new service, and which offered to fundraise to pay for the device and its installation.

Said Dr Watts: “We have a very supportive community and engaged patients, and so they were keen to help with the purchase, which was wonderful.”

The installation of the device involved securing two rounds of planning permission – both for the machine itself and the ramp which was needed to enable wheelchair access – and also some building work to redesign the interior of the practice. In all, this took six months.

Finally, the work was finished and the machine was installed. The practice staff named her Brenda the Vendor.

She can dispense 750 prescriptions per week – which equates to around 90% of the surgery’s total, and the regular whirring of its robotic conveyor is now part of the ambience in the practice.

The machine is available 24/7. Patients are sent a text with a code, which they input into the machine to get their medication, and – if they need to pay for their prescription – they can do so with a contactless card payment.

Added Dr Watts: “Our patients have found it very exciting and people say they’ve enjoyed it as it’s really simple to use and is available whenever they want to pop by.

“We know from the machine reports when it’s accessed and so we can see that people use it at all times – some pop by when they’re out for a walk on a Sunday, and one patient with social anxiety has told me she uses it very early in the morning when no-one else is about. I recently had a patient with a urine infection who couldn’t get to the surgery before it closed on a Friday evening but I was able to prescribe her antibiotics which she collected that evening from Brenda. It’s wonderful to be providing a service at all hours, even when we’re not physically in the building.

“Some people still want to come in to collect their prescriptions from the dispensing hatch as they enjoy that human interaction, but it has helped to reduce the number of people around the building at one time, which is obviously safer during this pandemic.”

Patients have been taking to social media to comment on the new device with one person on Twitter saying: “Perfect, collected this morning and so easy. Could time with school run, no queue and had baby in arms so managed easily one-handed! So simple!”

The surgery also reports that staff are happy with Brenda. Explains Dr Watts: “When we announced it to our team they were a little anxious – after all none of us are experts in programming robots. But it’s quite intuitive to use and it is now saving us a lot of counter time so our staff are more available to focus on dispensing and other aspects of their workload. The machine works via unique bar codes so is safer as it takes away the risk of human error.”

“This is a wonderful innovation and a great example of a surgery which is providing an enhanced level of customer service for their patients, “ said Vicky Stobbart, Integrated Care Partnership Director for Guildford and Waverley. “It’s so convenient for patients who no longer have to queue or have a wasted journey to check if their medicines are ready, and I’m delighted that it’s freeing up staff time too.”

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For more information please contact the Press Office on 07825 946551.

Note to editors

Two photographs of the automated dispensary machine are attached.

About Surrey Heartlands CCG

Surrey Heartlands CCG is the merged Clinical Commissioning Group which formed in April 2020 combining East Surrey, Guildford and Waverley, North West Surrey and Surrey Downs Clinical Commissioning Groups. The CCG is part of the [Surrey Heartlands Health and Care Partnership](#), which covers a population of over one million people.