

# Dr Ashley Liston

GP, Encompass Healthcare, Tyne and Wear

Dr. Ashley Liston has been a practicing GP for more than 20 years, having now been at Encompass Healthcare in Sunderland for around four years. The practice has been a GP training practice for over two years, recently training F2 doctors with Dr. Liston also working as a GP tutor. The practice team at Encompass Healthcare were also nominated as finalists in this year's prestigious Health and Social Care Awards in the category of Service Transformation.



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One area of service transformation for Dr. Liston's GP practice has been the accelerated uptake of the Choose and Book system for their referrals over the last year. Three GPs, one registrar and all the reception staff from the practice are now fully trained in Choose and Book.

Dr. Liston said: "Choose and Book fits in with our ethos of using modern technologies which improve patient care and are safe and secure. We are quite progressive as far as being a paperless practice. We're fairly well set up to become fully paperless

within the next year, we have a lot of systems which are paperless so we were quite comfortable with the concept of an electronic booking system."

### **Making it work in the practice**

When asked about how the GP practice implemented Choose and Book, and what their experience has been to date, Dr Liston comments, "we recognise the principles of the referral process within the Choose and Book system, and we committed ourselves to making it work. We wanted to actually be the people who would make

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Washington Primary Care Centre

the appointment with the patient wherever possible, allowing them the option of phoning up themselves and giving them some freedom to reflect on what would be convenient if you needed to". Dr Liston also adds, "I feel very comfortable with the idea that the GP continues to be the patients advocate right to the point where they are being given an appointment. Also, because GPs can do the vast majority of the referral process in Choose and Book, even with the letter being dictated or typed using the consultation record,

our practice staff have been released from a lot of administration tasks".

#### **Increasing patient confidence in the process**

Dr Liston feels that since Encompass Healthcare has been using Choose and Book for nearly all of their referrals, many of their patients would now feel that they're no longer getting the 'run around'. He said "It is possible to provide a very personal service with Choose and Book, and at the end of the day I know patients benefit from coming into the

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practice with a concern or problem and leaving with an appointment in their hand. This is something that will give patients a considerable degree of confidence with a good outcome, rather than having to wait with the uncertainty of when an appointment is going to arrive. I believe that patients are happier now that the process is simplified."

Encompass Healthcare are also finding that the number of patients with queries on the progress or status of their referral are decreasing as a result of using Choose and Book, when compared to the older paper method of referral. When patients are referred using the manual paper process, Dr Liston confirms there are more queries for the practice to deal with, "because they have had to wait and be dependent on an administration system to set up the appointments. Sometimes there were barriers to patients getting the appointment they need, which caused delays or an appointment which was inconvenient for the patient."

### **Increasing patient choice and involvement in their healthcare**

Like other NHS IT systems and services, Choose and Book offers patients greater involvement in their healthcare, because they can choose where and when they wish to be treated. When asked



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about how patients feel about their right to choice in his practice Dr Liston said "Generally, 90% of the time it's predictable what patients will be choosing... to stay local. But it's got to be good that you are encouraging them to think about alternative hospitals and treatment options. Nowadays there are more and more alternatives springing up, so just the very fact that if a new provider is arriving on the scene, and they're listed on the Choose and Book Directory of Services that patients have the option to choose this provider – well that just increases options for the patient."

"Choose and Book does facilitate and encourage further discussion with the patient. Not just to discuss with them their options but to actually see that there is a greater choice of

hospitals that we would not have previously considered, particularly with some of the new providers" he adds.

Doreen Galloway, Practice Manager at Encompass Healthcare, also adds: "Feedback from patients is that they seem to be happy with the system, and especially with the fact that they are in control of making an appointment that is convenient to them, at a hospital of their choice."

### **Realising the benefits in the GP practice**

When asked to list other benefits of the Choose and Book system for patients and his local NHS, Dr Liston believes integration with the independent sector, more consistency in referral letters, and a safer, more secure method referral are key:

### 1. Integration with the independent sector

"We also have the added benefit of a local private hospital who are taking on NHS referrals which has been extremely beneficial for patients. It is nice to see that patients can see these hospitals on the Choose and Book system, and choose them if they want to". Patients can review and compare their choice options using the information available on the NHS Choices website before they make their booking. Dr Liston agrees, "They are very happy to express their views based on their experiences and their beliefs about hospitals and that's often based on all sorts of information which has nothing to do with us GPs."

### 2. Consistency with referral letters

Dr Liston adds, "Once uploaded by the GP, all referral letters are stored securely in the Choose and Book system, negating the need for a consultant, or hospital administration staff to chase these from local GP practices. "I think also that the referral letters we write to consultants are much more focused and probably very succinct and I presume that this is something that consultants would appreciate"

### 3. A safer, more secure method of referral

"We have no concerns about patient confidentiality with Choose and Book" confirms Dr Liston. "There is a general concern that if paper referrals are going backwards and forwards, there is the potential for information to be lost or for other people to see the information. However, I think the Choose and Book system, where information is just going directly from the GP to the hospital consultant, is a safer process. We certainly have not had any problems with information security."

### Conclusion

**By embracing Choose and Book and using it in the way it was intended, the Encompass Healthcare GP practice have seen real improvements in processing and managing their referrals.**

Dr Liston confirms, "Choose and Book is not a huge cumbersome process which adds time, it actually has saved the practice time. I think if Choose and Book is done with the GP involved it allows us to be even more involved in allowing the patient to have trust and confidence in the referral and appointment process.

"The only challenge we've encountered is mainly related to the availability of appointments slots. The Choose and Book system works as long as there are available appointments - when hospital providers have not made enough appointments available on the system there can be problems."

Doreen Galloway, Practice Manager at Encompass Healthcare also adds "Overall, the Choose and Book system has greatly reduced the amount of secretarial time that is now required within the practice, allowing us to use this time for other key projects. Most of the credit for this reduction in secretarial time has to be awarded to the GPs who have embraced using Choose and Book to make referrals during their consultation time with the patient. This is of great benefit to the patients and staff alike, and as more and more specialities such as physiotherapy and community psychiatric nurse referrals become available, this too will reduce the amount of administration time we spend on these referrals. This will help to reduce our referral workload and I'm confident we will see yet again a further more effective and efficient service delivered to our patients."