

HOW EFFECTIVE IS MEDICAL PR & WHY IS IT NOT DOING MORE TO ADDRESS THE KEY USERS AND RECEIVERS OF THE NHS SERVICES?

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SUBMISSION DATE: 03/05/2019
REFERENCING TYPE: FALMOUTH HARVARD REFERENCING
WORD COUNT: 2,877 WORDS



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Abstract

This case study explores the effectiveness of current medical PR strategies and discusses how these methods unsuccessfully reaching the key users and receivers of NHS treatment. It then, further speculates methods that have the potential to be successful in targeting these audiences.

The exploratory research into Medical PR, its noticeable that it has done minimal but progressive PR in the way of helping out medical industry. Over the years, medical PR has promoted the likes of #ALSICEBUCKETCHALLENGE in 2014, to more currently, the cervical smear test 're-brand'. However, throughout the success of Medical PR it has taken to using online stories and social media to generate its promotion. The power of virality has become an extremely influential tool in modern PR strategies. Which, in our current technologically advanced society, is not un-common, nor stupid to use the influential power of social media, because it will reach a global market very quickly.

Nevertheless, although PR is maximising online coverage, it's beginning to forget about those who are not online. Which, undoubtedly will always raise the question, why should PR care about those not online, when realistically everyone will be tech savvy in a couple of years? Well, the results of extensive research into NHS budgets, shows they currently don't have a couple of years to wait. So, with the NHS is under financial pressure due to multiple different factors, from government cuts to demand of services. How can PR help?

One of the contributing factors to the financial strain, is the users and receivers of NHS treatment who are not able to access online articles and social media trends, that therefore miss the self-help information articles posted online. These people fall into two major categories. The first, are the elderly making appointments due to loneliness and lack of knowledge in self-helping; Then, the second, are both mentally or physically disabled individuals, needing to receive treatment with a considerable 'wait time', due to lack of funding from the NHS, but also from lack of self-help knowledge resulting in being less proactive.

This is ultimately where PR agencies need to be more forth coming. With a surprising low number of disabled PR staffing in PR overall, and PR agencies usually very separated from medical industries. Adopting a more 'traditional-modern' integrated approach could be the future answer of PR helping successfully address the NHS key users and receivers to help the NHS in the long run.

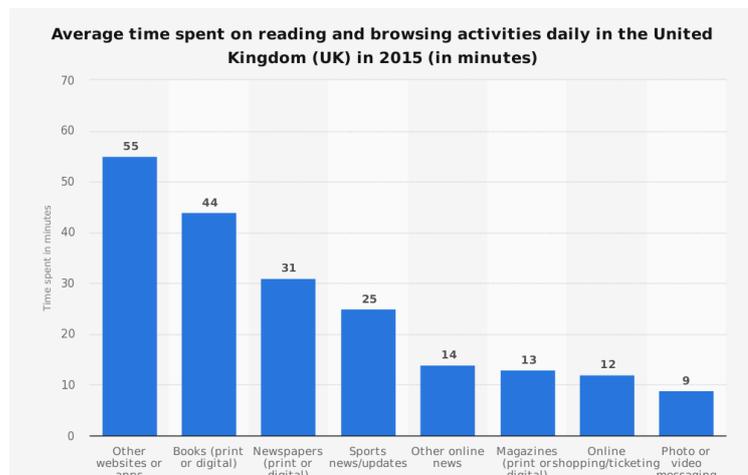
HOW EFFECTIVE IS MEDICAL PR AND WHY IS IT NOT DOING MORE TO ADDRESS THE KEY USERS AND RECEIVERS OF THE NHS SERVICES?

Medical PR has always been a hard area to successfully communicate to everyone because the industry is always being subjected to all the regulations surrounding sensitivity and classification. Medical language has to be factual and verified, which is hard to inspire through PR. Plus, to put it bluntly, the healthcare industry and the public relations industry are opposites. However, “with the healthcare industry constantly evolving, Public Relations [is] proving to be needed more now than it ever has done” (Hardy 2017). The biggest growing healthcare sector is the UK’s National Health Service (NHS). In England alone, data from 2017, shows there are 8,765 providers and commissioners of NHS services (“NHS Statistics, Facts and Figures” 2017) that “employs over a million” (Gulliver 2017) people. Healthcare is getting demanded on more and with the growing sectors within the industry, there are “multiple audiences within the Healthcare industry who require different messages” (Hardy 2017). Which poses the questions, how is medical PR going to keep up with the growing sectors, and how are they going to inspire successful messaging to multiple audiences? Especially the audiences that uses the NHS the most, because they are the sectors where PR needs to be intervening more.

How has Public Relations previously tackled Medical PR?

A “growing number of people [are] turning towards online media as a source of relatable stories and organic, real-time responses” (Norcross, 2018), which is ideal for PR to tap into the modern market and communicate the idea of ‘self-help’ successfully. The PR industry “inevitably, [knows] there will be a strong focus on online content and less on print” (Norcross, 2018), as shown by ‘the

average time spent browsing activities daily, in 2015,’ was consumed by ‘Apps and Websites’ (Graph 1, Ofcom n.d.) followed by newspapers – print or digital. With modern tech becoming easily accessible, consumers are turning towards apps like “Ali Parsa’s Babylon App, [that] is a GP consultation in your phone” (Mankee-Williams 2019, Appendix C) to help aid themselves. PR helps this growing industry by pushing promotional stories into the online ‘Evening Standard’ that evoke emotive trust “Ali Parsa: the former refugee bringing algorithms to



Graph 1 Average time spent on reading and browsing activities daily in the United Kingdom (UK) in 2015 (in minutes), Ofcom. n.d.

healthcare” (Edwardes 2018), which automatically communicates the ‘self-help’ message to the proactive working/middle-class commuter, who needs quick answers and genuine trusted help. PR has been successful in messaging to the ‘techy commuter’ demographic, as they are susceptible to the power of ‘The Doppler Effect.’ The scarcity of the momentary excitement being in the “front and center for an instant, but then it has gone” (Vance 2016) becomes addictive to tech users. The Doppler Effect is evident in how the 2014 ALS Ice Bucket Challenge made it to “153 countries and generated 440 million shares” (Smith 2018). PR promoted the hashtag #icebucketchallenge, and everyone wanted to get involved before the hype ran out. It is the same

with, 'Project 84' [image 1, ITV 2018] by Adam & Eve BBD's success. PR encouraged instant excitement as "a way to open up a 'conversation' ... with the public" (Crockett 2017, "Media Campaigns" 2019) quickly and effectively and this resulted in mass media impressions, receiving "36,000 Twitter mentions, and 2.1 billion pieces of earned media" (Degun 2018).



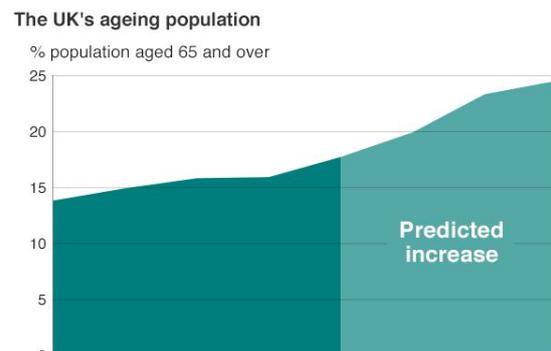
Image 1, 84 humanoid sculptures on top of the ITV building London, in order to combat male suicide, ITV. 2018.

How are PR communications currently helping the NHS?

Medical PR has successfully engaged the messaging and platforms of the "25% of people they are targeting with health products, down to a T" (Mankee-Williams 2019, Appendix c). It's utilisation of online media to help release strain on the NHS, means that as Mankee-Williams states "I can buy Fitbits, smart home devices and god knows what, all because PR has tailored itself to a certain demographic, as they know of my self-interest in my health" (Mankee-Williams 2019, Appendix C). Successful targeting has allowed PR to push social changes, as "the launch of the iconic FitBit in 2007 has been a key part of the 'quantified self' movement" (D'arcy 2018). PR agencies are taking on pathological changes a lot more due to the success of previous medical PR. Current agencies, like PHA Media have been currently "promot[ing] MedTech over the recent months in order to help the strain on NHS staff" (Crockett 2017) and industries like, Public Health England running an online rebrand campaign for Smear Tests, in hope it will "normalise the term" (Triggle 2019), in order to teach members of the public that "cervical screening saves lives" (Gil 2019). PR is making a conscious effort to get involved more in successful communication to health aiding products, because with the future of the NHS is relying on people taking on responsibility for their own health.

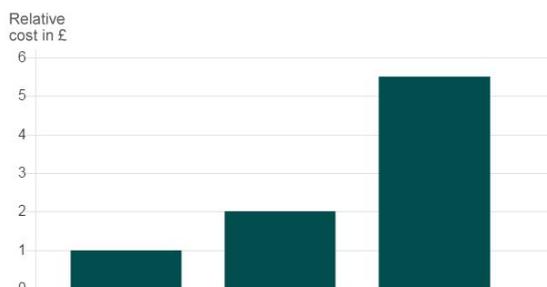
Who are the main users and receivers of NHS treatment?

Ironically, this brings up a pronounced issue. In 2018, "20% of disabled adults had never used the internet" and "4.5 million adults who had never used the internet, more than half (2.6 million) were aged 75 years and over" ("Internet Users, UK: 2018" 2018). These statistics bring to light two categories of people: disabled and elderly - who use the NHS more than most and are not being reached by this 'exciting, successful, online" PR. The most significant demand on the NHS is because, first of all, the seniors are continually becoming a bigger and bigger part of society, as people are living longer and predict to continue this pattern (Graph 2, Triggle 2017). This pattern in conjunction with "social isolation



Graph 2 - The UK's ageing population (Triggle 2017)

Comparing NHS spending on people by age
Spending for patients increases as they get older



Graph 3 - Comparing NHS spending on people by age. (Triggle 2017)

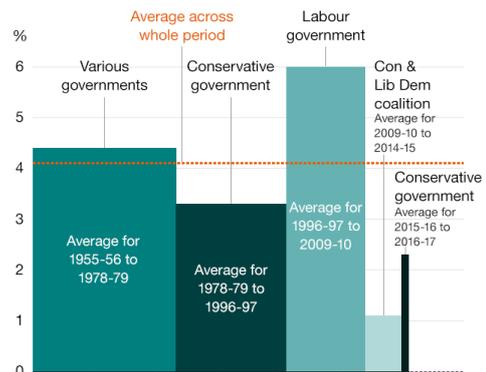
being the single most contributing factor in deteriorating older people, [means] they go to the GP 6 times on average more than any family, because they are lonely" (Mankee-Williams 2019, Appendix C). The elderly cause NHS money to be spent on not important appointments (Graph 3,

Triggle 2017), when spending could be used to help our NHS retract from financial difficulties (Graph 4, Triggle 2017).

As seen in graph 3, the budget saw its tightest period from 2005 to 2015 and still trying to recover from this recession. So, with financial issues like these, the NHS is “overstretched and ha[ve] a shortfall of 100,000 [members of] staff”, resulting in “the development of the existing workforce ... [to] struggle to sustain current services” (Lilburne 2019). Which has the domino effect throughout the NHS, and results in another impactful group of NHS users – those with a disability – not receiving the treatments they need. In 2015, the National Con Denial Inquiry into suicide and Homicide stated that “staff shortages have contributed to deaths on inpatient wards” (Farmer and Dyer 2016), and with “attitudes towards mental health being more open” (Abraham 2019, Appendix A), the increase in mental health users has added more strain. So, alongside the growing mental health users of NHS services, the current NHS stats are saying the likes of “many wheelchair users face delays in getting their chair – 70% waiting more than three months” (NHS England, 2019). The rise in all disabilities ranging from mental illness to a physical impairment, are all having to suffer because the NHS struggles to find the funds to support them.

How spending on health has slowed down

Average annual increase in government spending on health, based on 2017-18 prices



Graph 4 – How spending on health has slowed down (Triggle 2017)

Therefore, with these two primary users and receivers of the NHS services causing the most issues and facing the harshest consequences, why is PR spending so much time focussing on targeting tech users when they need to be helping those who are not reached by digital news or online social media news.

The future of PR & How could it be doing more to target the primary users & receivers?

This key user research leads to the question: how can Medical PR adapt its current strategies, in order to reach the biggest users of the NHS, who are not all online and have a range of issues?

The urgency for PR to aid in this sector, as explained before, is because the NHS is under threat of over demand and strained funding. The NHS needs every user to adopt a self-help ideology. So, to do this, PR needs to enthuse the two primary users and receivers of the NHS services, doing this as well.

“Since the late 1990s, a growing body of public relations research has recognized internet technology as a vehicle for relationship building” (Saffer et al. 2013), however, it is arguably seen more recently that, “none of us know what digital disruption will bring” (Townsend 2018). So, why has medical PR become so reliant on digital success, when they need to expand back into the real world.

It is said that well executed public relation communication will:

- “Build, maintain and restore trust,
- Improve knowledge and understanding,
- Guide and encourage appropriate attitudes, decisions, actions, and behaviours, and,
- Encourage collaboration and cooperation” (N. Hyer and Covello 2006)

So, to gain all these things with the elderly and the disabled audiences, PR needs to change its current ‘tech focused’ strategy, because these four elements are only influenced by successful PR. The power all lies within PR generating alternative communication methods.

Interestingly, it is surprising to find out that according to a survey conducted by 'The Chartered Institute for Public Relations' that only "6% of all public relation professionals identify as having a disability or a long-term health condition" (Hawthorn 2019), which could be a contributing factor in why disability aimed PR is lacking? If they do not have disabled employees in the industry, how are they meant to know how to relate this audience with real-world communication?

Public Relations agencies are lacking reaching all people with disabilities on a personal level, and anything they are doing to help, like generating awareness for mental health through writing about 'Project 84' or sharing #icebucketchallenge to generate awareness for ALS disease, could be seen as counter-productive. Rather than reaching people with a message to self-help, PR is consumed by gaining a 'hyper change' in this 'hypermodern' society to justify success (O'Baoil 2017). This, according to the theory of 'Slacktivism' [Image 2, O'Baoil 2017], participants on social media will engage in a "low-risk, low-cost activity via social media, ... grant[ing] satisfaction to the person engaged in the activity" (Rotman 2011) without actually making any active changes to society. Furthermore, this theory also proves that even if PR was to turn to social media to gain awareness for elderly loneliness or disability; no one would actively participate in a change to aid these groups. So, rather than helping the NHS or the people, social media PR could be seen as only generating a superficial awareness that they measure as successful communication.

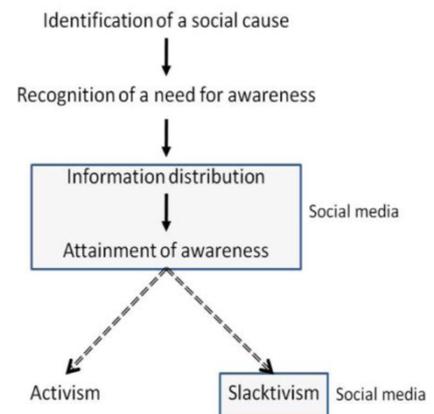


Image 2- A process diagram of social media based activism and slacktivism (O'Baoil 2017)

This ideology that social media is the answer to modern day communication does need to change, because "we all have a brain and a body... [and] mental illness has become labelled and medicalised" (Abraham 2019, Appendix A) all because social media has bought on 'mental health' like a new hype resulting in it now being stigmatised. Nevertheless, public relations could be seen as starting to help take away some stigmas already, like its current rebrand of the smear tests, due the 'stigma' of it sounding ugly or painful. However, unlike smear tests, with a disability it needs to be taken away from online and treated in real time society.

Secondly, with the current elderly generation, they are still those born in the 'baby boomers' era. This means, although some are able to use modern technology, they did not grow up in the technology era and therefore understanding social media viral campaigns is beyond their knowledge of using tech. Interestingly, interviewing an elderly lady called Christine Tucker, she said, "no one comes to see me unless it is my family" (Tucker 2019, Appendix B). Then, as I continued to ask her questions on technology, her responses like "I can just work my flip phone" (Tucker 2019, Appendix B), immediately indicated to me, that PR is just not seen by a lot of the elderly, because they have no real access to the internet. Inevitably, resulting in the lack of technological communication also impacting on their loneliness.

So, without the internet, how could public relations help the NHS' reputation by infiltrating and sending messages to these two audiences? Well, the NHS's vision for the future is all about adopting a "'modern traditional' scenario [that] would retain the paternalistic feel of the NHS, with perhaps lots of remote care and telehealth technologies as healthcare is increasingly devolved to our homes" (Barlow and Evennett 2019). Public Relations could parallel this 'modern traditional' tone and start to use older techniques once again, from a time before the internet became so evolved. The modern messaging of social media PR has adopted a 'shorter story, larger impact' (Lawlor 2018) strategy, which combined with the traditional methods of PR, like direct mail, 'hand

delivery couriers, phone calls and newspaper publishing’ (Atkin 2017) would help reach users and receivers of the NHS services, who have conditions that stop them from leaving their homes or surrounding areas. Even, if traditional PR targeted tv or radio more again, and focused in on ‘positive brand building’ (Camp 2017) for the NHS aiming it towards the main users and receivers, it would somewhat bring the messaging to them, in a more suitable, personal and effective way. PR agencies are beginning to neglect these simple forms of communication now that online impressions been so successful.

This neglect, has resulted in a mass number of elderly and disabled people, not knowing about great ventures the NHS is currently doing. The NHS is currently trying to make it easier for them to understand the services, in order for them to become more independent and self-help. “A report produced jointly by the North Tyneside Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG), North Tyneside Council and Northumbria NHS Foundation Trust” (NHS England 2019) produced results that the original complexities of the healthcare system, was too confusing for the elderly and disabled to understand. So, they took it upon themselves to produce a more effective programme that would ensure “health and social care work more effectively together...[therefore], ...avoiding unnecessary hospital admissions and reducing A&E visits” (NHS England 2019) from the elderly and disabled. However, not many know about this venture because medical PR is failing to talk about these ‘not so exciting’ topics, which hold the capacity to change medical messaging for the future.

You see, another messaging infiltration point is, where most people in these two audiences seek medical advice - the local GP practice. The NHS in 2017, had 7,454 GP practices currently in action [Table 1, NHS Digital 2017]. Therefore, these GP practices are widely spread across the nation.

Mankee-Williams said, that “within a GP surgery instead of going out relying on private PR agencies to educate, why don’t they have a PR professional inside who talks to people?” This would “gather the communication between villages and get to know the locals” (Mankee-Williams 2019, Appendix C). This follows the same principles of what the North Tyneside CCG, Council and Foundation Trust are trying to do (stated above), because their programme shows that integrating different teams generates a more efficient outcome. The medical and PR industries are opposites, but instead of keeping them separate, why are they not physically integrating and working conjunctively to offer bespoke solutions from town to town? As famously written in Harper Lee’s, *To Kill A Mockingbird* “You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view” (Milton 1984), which is relatable to how PR could be helping the NHS better. Going out and meeting the people who need messaging the most, would increase engagement and inevitably help demand on NHS.

The Conclusion

There is no doubt in saying that online social media PR is successful; it has been proven and shown through PR campaigns in the past and those currently in the present. However, the NHS is growing into multiple sectors and reaching out to multiple audiences, to which is great, if all those audiences can engage in online activity. However, as mentioned before, from the statistics, not all of the key users and receivers of the NHS services are. Therefore, for PR to successfully inspire messaging to reduce demand on NHS, they need to employ a more diverse staff and veer away from PR-only agencies, by integrating into local teams consisting of medical professionals. As

Table 1: Number of practices providing data to the collection since September 2015

	HEE		PCWT		No data		Total Practices
	Practices	%	Practices	%	Practices	%	
Sep 2015 submission	1,154	15.0	5,607	73.1	913	11.9	7,674
Mar 2016 submission	1,584	20.8	5,473	71.9	556	7.3	7,613
Sep 2016 submission	1,542	20.5	5,414	71.9	571	7.6	7,527
Dec 2016 extraction ⁽¹⁾	1,917	25.6	5,426	72.5	140	1.9	7,483
Mar 2017 extraction ⁽¹⁾	2,020	27.1	5,314	71.3	120	1.6	7,454

Source: NHS Digital

Mankee-Williams said in her interview, that she always puts “psychologists in [her] IT teams because they are poles apart in their thinking” (Mankee-Williams 2019, Appendix C), which allows for the team to generate solutions in creative yet practical ways that think of covering all angles. The industries need to start thinking this way, by firstly, preventing demand on NHS services at the very start of the chain. They should adopt some traditional, yet once modernised methods to message the NHS most frequent users and receivers; Secondly, they need to get in touch with the locals in the villages who need bespoke messaging. Real life messaging, and not reputation reliant social messaging is the crucial change that needs to be made to target these two audiences, gathered from all my research. Every county in the UK is different, and every person in the UK is different. So, why is PR not making every message they produce bespoke? This way they will be helping the NHS in the long run, enabling it to gain financial stability with current political and economic circumstances.

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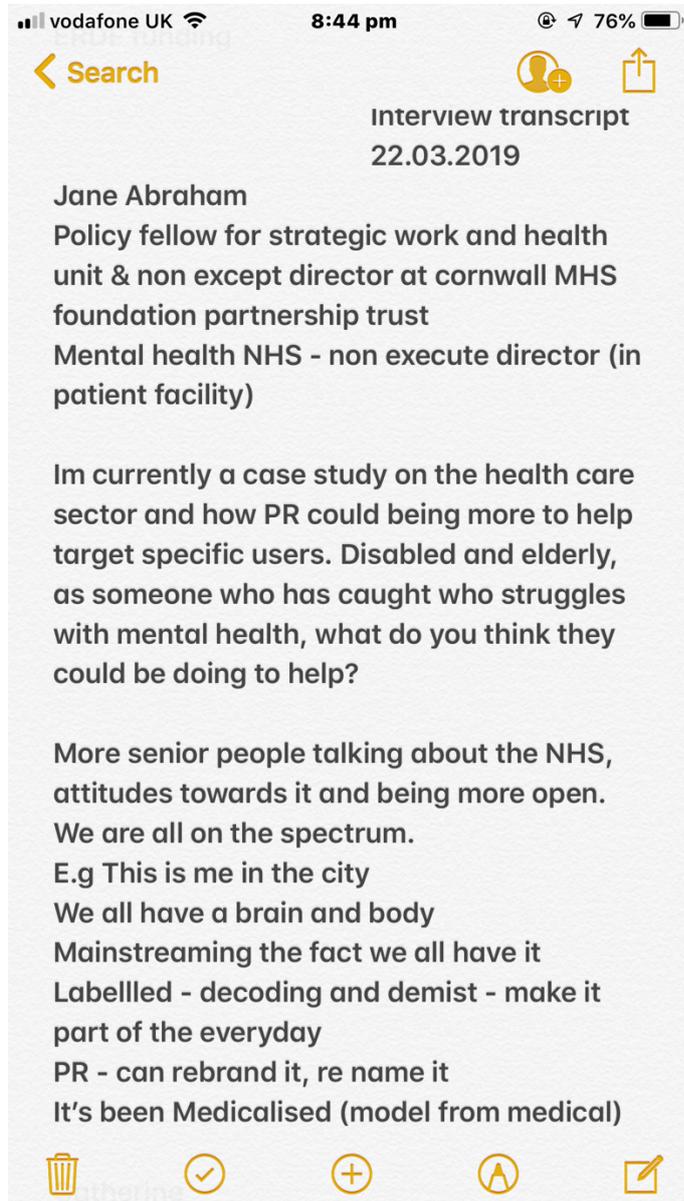
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Appendix A

Interview 22/03/2019

ABRAHAM, Jane 2019. Policy Fellow for Strategic Work and Health Unit. & Non-Executive Director at Cornwall's NHS Foundation Trust



Appendix B

Interview 31/03/2019

Tucker, Christine 2019. Unemployed Elderly Woman, Living alone in Devon.

Interview Transcript
31/03/2019

Christine Tucker
Unemployed elderly lady

Thank you for chatting to me.

That's okay, nice to have you round no one comes to see me unless it is my family

If you don't mind me asking, how often do you go to the doctors a year (averagely)?

I go quite a lot

Hip, back, colds

20-30 times a year

Do you find the doctors is a good place to chat to people?

I suppose so, I always see someone I know in the waiting room.

Do you read the posters in the waiting room?

If they are bold, and colourful. I usually read the magazines

How has the change in technology affected you?

I can just work my flip phone

I don't understand it all

Do you feel like society could be doing more to communicate with you?

Yes, I have to go find out information

I don't have a computer thing

Complicated

Post is a good way to get info

Appendix C

Interview 12/03/2019

Mankee-Williams, ANNA 2019. Senior Research Fellow Technology and Innovation in Health and Care.

Interview Transcript
12.03.19

Interviewee: Anna Mankee-Williams
Senior Research Fellow Technology and Innovation in Health and Care

First thoughts on my question?

PR = happy jolly = something good (the ideas of size 6) consumer behaviour
NHS = black hole of complexity of challenge

How has the demand on the NHS affected around the UK?

Population expectation – contract (unwritten)
Free at point
NHS made this country
Provisional and commissioning side of NHS
Devon county council – children services are run by virgin health care. Health visiting and school visiting out for tender – privatised service. Slipped through the net?
NHS is not providing the services, but these private companies need to be paid e.g. Virgin

How likely is it with the demand rising, the NHS will stay free?

Now I can buy a “FitBit”, smart home devices – certain demographic targeting because of own self-interest in my health.
What do people want to fight for? – we have to change what we expect
Whole scale privatisation
Universal health service – minimalistic
Insurance based scheme behind it

What services are the most in demand? And Why?

NHS has been systematically broken up e.g. Primary/ secondary/ clinical commissioning
Can't thinking about a homogenist unit
Huge amount of NHS privatised
Support services e.g. support services (sterilise)
Virgin has benefited from NHS

What services could we be providing to help support the NHS?

NHS is not providing the services, but these private companies need to be paid e.g. Virgin
Medical teams should have an PR person. As medical messaging is not good. If there was PR person in every GP (multidisciplinary team, same mind set – not creative)
Health and local authorities
Psychologist in an IT teams because they are poles apart in there thinking
Within a GP surgery instead of going out to private team, have a PR inside who talks to waiting rooms, communication between villages, see the locals.
Social isolation is the single factor in older people – 6x on average that an family
Villages empty out during day and come back in evening – working parents to afford housing
So, as a PR infiltrate and make bespoke solutions – would that reduce demand?
Paternal instinct – we do not have the *societal messaging skills* e.g. smoking is bad don't do it. I know I'm a doctor.

Do you reckon PR has affected over the years? With the likes of project 82 and ALS icebucket?

Now I can buy a FitBit, smart home devices – certain demographic targeting because of own self-interest in my health. – 25% targeting of health products down to a T. good to get them off the books for the moment. But increasing social equality, social responsibility
Bias information – consume information – promote information?
They don't care about deprived neighbourhoods
Ali Parser Babylon App – GP consultation in your phone – to ease pressure (but really its intensifying them)

Is PR set in its ways, and that's why NHS is so far one way and PR is so far another?

Age and race appropriate
Capitalism
Money grabbing schemes rather than making substantial change because of influence on success

Do you reckon PR could educate people on medical needs, like mental health to help reduce demand on NHS?

Private health care – book a doctor's appointment – what happens when I have issues to deal with?
How do we educate people – how not be hypochondriac?
How has inaccurate websites and quizzes that have precedence over NHS certified information
Inaccurate portals have better PR? to create demand
Or does the NHS have poor PR?
How money and PR take search's to for front of people's attentions, which self-diagnosis at the top of the search. And the page 4 accuracy
PR needs to do more 90%
Population expectation – contract