

Patient Participation Groups (PPG's) are not new. The first were formed in 1972 and N.A.P.P. was formed in 1978 as their umbrella organisation. Patient Participation Groups work with their practices to provide practical support, to help patients to take more responsibility for their own health and to provide strategic input and advice. They are based on cooperation between the practice staff and patients. They help to improve communication.

What do Patient Participation Groups do?

The activities of PPGs vary because they develop to meet local need. They include:

- Improving communication through newsletters, websites and other means
- Organising health promotion events in partnership with the practice
- Running services to meet local need, such as volunteer transport, prescription delivery, patient libraries, befriending and carer support
- Providing strategic advice, influencing commissioning and carrying out research
- Supporting the practice in its dealings with other bodies

How do Groups get started?

The impetus behind a Group's formation can come from the practice or its patients. Members can be recruited in a number of ways, depending upon the purpose of the Group. The "safest" method is for the practice to invite selected patients to form a "think tank". In most cases, this will progress into recruitment from the wide patient body through, for example:

- Advertising on notice boards, newsletters etc
- Choosing individuals to give a particular demographic balance
- Inviting prominent local organisations to send representatives
- Through elections at Annual General Meetings
- After formal application procedures led by the PPG

There are advantages and disadvantages with each approach. A pragmatic approach may be sensible at the outset but this should become more inclusive over time.

Setting objectives

It is vital that PPGs have a clear sense of purpose that is agreed with the practice. One way to achieve this is to use the Cherrystones tool developed by N.A.P.P. This invites PPGs to prioritise all of their possible activities as this year, next year, some time or never. By choosing a small number of "this year" targets, PPGs can be clear about their focus and should then review their objectives regularly.

How many PPGs are there?

In 2005 and 2007, N.A.P.P. completed two major surveys of general practice. Surveys were sent to 3600 practices in England, with more than 1000 responses received. Of those that replied in 2007, 37% reported having a Patient Participation Group. Roughly four in ten practices with a PPG reported that the PPG was quite or very influential. Currently there are around 850 PPGs affiliated to N.A.P.P. Research carried out by the NHS Information Centre in January 2009 revealed that 40% of English practices had a PPG. There has been significant growth and the latest estimate suggests that the figure is around 75%.

