SelfSTarT: First Contact Physiotherapists enhancing the care of patients with back pain using a digital solution

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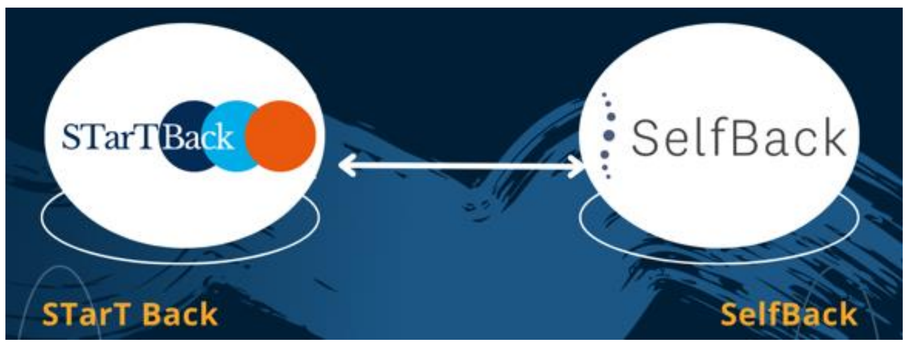
Background

- Globally, back pain is the leading cause of years lived with disability and creates enormous strain on individuals, healthcare systems and the economy
- In the United Kingdom (UK), over 20 million people live with musculoskeletal pain, low back pain(LBP) being one of the most common causes (Versus Arthritis State of Musculoskeletal Health, 2023)
- In the UK population, it has been recognised that the socioeconomic inequities have widened in those presenting to primary care with low back pain (Yu et al 2023). This means that those living in more deprived areas are more likely to seek help than those in less deprived areas, with primary care seeing 15-40% more patients with low back pain (Yu et al 2023)
- NHS England prioritised digital innovations in its Programme Funding for 2021 and launched competitive calls to support Integrated Care Systems (ICSs) who had an active interest in introducing or scaling up digital innovations within their musculoskeletal (MSK) pathway. The overall aim being to reduce low clinical value outpatient visits by 30%, to digitise, connect and transform care closer to home (NHSx MSK Digital Adoption Fund call)
- There are two evidence-based primary care innovations that are known to assist in the management of patients with low back pain; the Keele STarT Back risk stratification tool, and the SelfBacK app that supports back pain self-management. Both have been rigorously evaluated through randomised controlled trials (Hill et al 2011, Foster el al, 2014 and Sandal et al 2021)
- All IT governance approvals were obtained through Midlands Partnership University Foundation NHS Trust (MPFUT), Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent Integrated Care System and partner organisations, to assure the safe and effective implementation of the project



Methods

- Project developers: First Contact Physiotherapists (FCPs) in MPFUT worked in collaboration with NHS clinical team members across Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent, FCPs in Wolverhampton, academics from Keele University and Glasgow University, implementation experts from the Keele Impact Accelerator Unit (IAU), the SelfBacK IT industry partners/app developers, Patient and Public involvement and Engagement (PPIE) Representatives with lived experience of back pain, and local NHS leaders from the local Integrated Care System
- Patients with LBP were assessed by the FCP, screened with the STarTBack stratification tool and if appropriate signposted to the SelfBack app for supported self-management
- An existing large research programme at Keele University called the MIDAS study (funded by the Nuffield Foundation via the Oliver Bird fund) provided a comparative control sample of primary care low back pain patients

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Results

This pilot recruited patients between August 2022 and March 2023

- 17 FCPs trained in the SelfSTarT approach
- 34 SelfSTarT project active practices
- 13 FCPs actively recruited patients working across all sites
- 110 SelfBack app activation codes issued
- 52 SelfBack active users

Compared to MIDAS project control group, using the SelfSTarT approach with the SelfBack app appears to improve most patient experiences slightly, but significantly improve patient experience around: a) receiving sufficient information and b) patients feeling they have an agreed care plan.

Compared to MIDAS control group Self Back patients were slightly younger, more likely to be male, more likely to be in work and have better heath literacy.

Qualitative study of the experiences of the FCPs highlighted positive experience of the project and app, digital exclusion concerns including those patients not comfortable with or unable to afford technology; along with thoughts that system feedback and the approach to accessing the resources required improvements.

PPIE member described the app as *'like having a friend in your pocket'.*

“ PPIE described the app as *'like having a friend in your pocket'* ”

“ Patient experiences around information and care plans significantly improved ”

“ 50% of patients given the app used it ”

Conclusion

SelfSTarT combined 2 research evidence based, rigorously tested approaches to effectively manage Low Back Pain (STarT Back and SelfBack).
Patents reported a significant difference in feeling like they had an agreed care plan and receiving sufficient information.
From a 'Big data' and policy perspective the app was accepted and used by almost 50% of those it was offered to, suggesting the approach is valuable in supporting self-management in the highly prevalent population of patients with LBP.

Impact

The Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent ICS Musculoskeletal Stewardship and Transformation Group and the Impact Accelerator Unit at Keele University, have successfully secured funds to roll out the SelfSTarT project into Community Physiotherapy services and Emergency Departments in Midlands Partnership Foundation Trust.

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