

## **Paediatric Advice Line (P-PAL): A Quality Improvement Initiative Between Primary Care Doctors and Paediatricians**

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Dear Editor,

Bridging the gap between primary care services and specialist hospital services is an ongoing challenge. The crisis in our emergency departments (ED) and outpatient department (OPD) waiting times have created an increasing barrier to delivering optimal paediatric care. Many patients have no option but to attend the ED to get a response for a subacute medical issue.

The paediatric consultants of Portiuncula Hospital rolled out the Portiuncula Paediatric Advice Line (P-PAL) initiative in September 2021 for general practitioners (GPs) and community medical doctors (CMDs). A dedicated mobile phone, staffed by paediatric consultants on a rotational basis, can be phoned by GPs or CMDs for two hours each weekday for non-urgent issues.

The aim of our study was to evaluate the P-PAL service six months after implementation and to seek areas for improvement. A survey was distributed to GPs and CMDs serving the Portiuncula catchment area. Anonymous data were collected using an online survey tool. Data were collated for the total calls received in the first six months of the project.

Fifty-six calls were received in the first six months. 21 (37.5%) queries were resolved by the phone consultation with provision of access to clinical information sheets. 15 (26.8%) were directed to OPD. 10 (17.9%) were seen in the paediatric ambulatory care unit. 10 (17.9%) were referred to ED.

A total of 26 responses to our survey from GPs (24/26 – 92%) and CMDs (2/26) were received. 12/26 (44%) were aware of the P-PAL service. Of these 7/12 (58%) had used the service. All who had used the service found it useful and reported that the family of the child were happy with the outcome. Improvements to the service suggested included longer operating hours and email capability. All feedback to the service was positive and felt that this service had supported their practice.

Within our study, we demonstrate that over a third of queries were managed by telephone call and negated the child attending our ED or requiring an OPD referral to be added to our waiting list. This is higher than figures reported in a single centre observational study in the UK which demonstrated an advice line reduced short stay admissions by approximately 10% without any statistical significance<sup>1</sup>.

Barriers to expanding this service include no administration support at present and ensuring that the service is maintained during busy periods of clinical duties. Disseminating information about our initiative has proven challenging, given that we have no single email distribution list to our CMDs and GPs serving Portiuncula Hospital. Limitations of the study included the small sample size of calls and survey responses. The study has given us important guidance for improving the service going forward.

Overall, we believe the P-PALS line has been successful in providing advice and guidance over the phone to doctors in the community. Our initiative seeks to align with the Sláintecare value of “Right care, right place, right time by the right team” and we seek to build and improve this service over the coming years.

**Declarations of Conflicts of Interest:**

None declared.

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