Babylon pilot abandoned after app is 'manipulated' by patients

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- Patients used video consultation and symptom checker app to “speed up” access to a

GP appointment.

- CCGs decide to pull out of testing early because patients’ responses negated any

benefits of reducing demand by managing conditions online.

 - News emerges amid criticism of Babylon’s involvement in the NHS, particularly through

GP at Hand partnership in London.

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Commissioners in London have ditched plans for a pilot of the Babylon Health’s GP video consultation app after patients “effectively manipulated” the service, board papers reveal.

Clinical commissioning groups in North West London were testing Babylon’s video consultation and symptom checker app as a tool for reducing GP attendance, by triaging patients online. If successful, the app would have been rolled out across north west London

However, North West London Collaboration of CCGs board papers show the project was dropped at an early stage after, instead of reducing demand, a “pilot group” of patients using the app “effectively manipulated the system in order to secure GP appointments”.

The papers said: “The board was updated on the pilot, which looked at technology to drive a reduction in GP attendance. It was reported that the pilot group had effectively manipulated the system in order to secure GP appointments, thereby negating any potential benefits. Following questions and further discussion, the board agreed not to proceed with the Babylon pilot at this stage.”

The app was only tested with a “small group of patients” in September with plans for a wider pilot involving 16 GP practices. If successful, it would have been rolled out across north west London, the papers said.

A spokeswoman for the CCGs confirmed they had “considered” using the Babylon app.

She added: “The CCGs considered the merits of this app as a tool to help manage demand on GPs – particularly through the symptom-checker feature.

“We worked closely with patients to find out what demand there was for the app. We found that patients were typically most interested in using the app to speed up GP access, rather than the symptom checker.”

The CCG collaboration comprises Brent, Central London, Ealing, Hammersmith and Fulham, Harrow, Hillingdon, Hounslow and West London.

Babylon, along with several emerging competitors, is a private company that provides on demand video GP consultation and a chatbot style symptom checker from a smart phone app.

The Babylon app is available privately for a monthly fee but is increasingly also being offered free to NHS patients through their GPs.

Babylon, headed by Circle founder Ali Parsa, is also heavily involved in several national projects with NHS England that, if successful, could lead the company to playing a major role in delivering online NHS services.

Concerns about Babylon’s role in the NHS increased this month after the company launched GP at Hand, a collaboration with London GP practices that will make its video consultation freely available to any NHS patient that switches to participating practices.

GP at Hand has been accused, mostly by GPs, of “cherry picking” relatively healthy patients and excluding those with more complex health needs.

A week after the service was announced, the London local medical committees passed a motion calling for a halt to the deployment of online GP services in the NHS until there was more robust evidence they benefited patients.

The North West London testing was part of the CCGs’ aim to use online consultations to reduce GP demand, as outlined in the area’s sustainability and transformation plan.

The Babylon project was funded by Health Education England with much of the assessment work carried out by Imperial College Health Partners. These organisations will continue to research alternative digital tools for accessing GPs in north west London.

A collaboration spokeswoman said: “The information gathered from talking to patients was successful in informing the on-going work of the sector as we explore this area further.”

An HEE spokeswoman said the organisation had worked on a pilot with the CCGs and ICHP looking at digital solutions to free up time for busy practices, as well as how staff could be trained to use new technology. She added: “There is ongoing evaluation of this work and HEE continues to work with the STP and the CCG in looking at transformation of the workforce.”