# Sustainability, equality and dignity: the triple bottom line in period health

## Period Health

## **Please** **identify (more than one option may be selected)**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Adaptation |[ ]  Communications and engagement  |  |[ ]  Estates and facilities (energy, waste, water) |[ ]  Food, catering and nutrition  |[ ]
| Funding and financial mechanisms  |[ ]  Medicines |  |[ ]  Research, innovation and offsetting |[ ]  Strategic ambition  |[ ]
| Supply chain and procurement |[x]  Sustainable models of care |  |[x]  Travel and transport |[ ]  Workforce, networks and system leadership |[ ]
| Green/blue space and biodiversity |[ ]  Digital transformation |  | [ ]  | Sustainability education | [x]  |  |  |
|  | Other (please specify): Period Health, women’s health, disability equality, period poverty,  |

\*Topics aligned with the 12 Greener NHS workstreams (NHS England) are shaded.

##

## Key message / aim:

Traditional period products are mostly plastic and in our life-time we will use thousands, producing waste which ends up in landfill. By introducing period pants to young people in hospital we support them to be independent managing their periods when they have a disability, reduce the finance burden of periods and encourage changes in behaviour and understanding towards reusable rather than single use products.

## What was the problem?

Young people with disabilities often cannot manage traditional period products so were unable to manage their periods independently in hospital. Traditional products often also contain toxic chemicals which are not good for the user or the environment. Hospitals often do not provide period products and there is little information about sustainable alternatives. This means that young people were dependent on their parents /carers to manage their periods and not aware of solutions which could help them. Having an operation can induce periods unexpectedly but this was not included in their preparation for a hospital stay. Period poverty is also a growing problem; during the pandemic 1/3 of young girls and women aged 14-21 struggled to afford menstrual products and affecting school attendance (Plan International UK May 2022). People with disabilities are the most likely to be affected. This impacts on health and wellbeing, education and safety of girls and women.

## What was the solution?

By issuing period pants to young people with disabilities or restrictions to their hand use while in hospital we were able to support their independent menstrual management.

Working the communication department, we provided clear and inclusive information about alternatives and about the challenges of having a period in hospital with information about anaesthetic induced periods on the intranet, on toilet doors and in discussions with families.

Changes to the admissions proforma worked through with nursing colleagues meant that all young people coming into hospital were asked about periods, pointed to the website information for sustainable products and advised to bring products with them.

Products were provided following a grant from the Healthier Futures Action Fund which Occupational Therapists and nursing staff were then able to provide to young people on the wards.

A questionnaire was devised with the QI team using QR code and reaction and feedback was gathered. The feedback was very positive, and results were shared via talks and posters to other therapists.

## What were the challenges?

Initially there were pushbacks from the procurement who were actively hostile towards the idea of buying new products. Applications for small sums of money for a trial to the hospital charity was refused. There were questions about who and how the pants would be washed if provided by the NHS and reused so it was decided that the Occupational Therapy department would purchase as an item supporting individual independence much like a wheelchair or adaptive cutlery. The Occupational Therapists worked with young people one by one.

Not having allocated time for this project meant that working with many different teams took some time – the communications, nursing and electronic patient records teams were all integral to the process of getting information out and changes in proformas introduced.

## What was the impact?

Patient outcomes: Patients report being very happy with the pants, 65% were happier , 75% more in control , almost all - 97% said they would use them again and most- 85% had already recommended or would recommend to others. Comments were overwhelming positive with carers/parents reporting things like, “it’s a complete game changer!” and others recommending that there be more education for minority groups (Bengali specifically) as they felt they were such a great option.

Population outcomes: The changes in understanding about menstruation and sustainable menstrual management have long term impacts and can change individual, family and community views about what products they use.

Environmental impact: Although small amounts of CO2e were saved relatively according to the numbers of pants given out (between 4.4 kg per person x 100 people which is between 440 kg - 660kg CO2e) the changes in behaviour going forward will be greater as each year this is added to. Also the ripple effect (lots of people are recommending to others) means that the impact may be more widespread. The costs and impact of plastic waste incinerated and going to landfill has not been calculated which obviously will also have had a big impact over someone’s lifetime.

Social impact: The positive financial impact on individuals who are experiencing period poverty can be great and save people up to £120 each year. The social impact in terms of attendance at school, social events and ability to participate and be independent were not specifically measured, but the verbal and written feedback about increase in confidence and participation is huge.

Financial impacts: It is not known what the financial savings have been for the hospital in reduced waste, reduced blocked toilets and bins although there will have been a reduction in waste produced. The positive financial impact on individuals who are experiencing period poverty can be great and save people up to £120 each year.

## What were the learning points?

It is important to recognise where you affect change, who are the experts in who to talk to in each area; for example the Quality Improvement team were quickly and easily able to put together a questionnaire and make a QR code for it, reducing hours or work! The comms team and face to face teaching and discussions with many teams helped with implementation and information. Talking to young people about the product also supported language and the issues which were important to them.

## Next steps

It is hoped that by further talking about this project and providing information and supporting use in other areas that sustainable alternatives to period products will become standard and available in all areas of the NHS, particularly in toilets and shops, but also provided by the NHS to support people in hospital.

## What the team and/or patients and carers had to say

The patients and carers were overwhelming positive with comments such as: “This is such a great project, I’ve told all my family and think that my (Bengali) community could really benefit from more information on this!”. “This is a complete game changer, she’s independent now!” and “ I thought they would be horrible, but they’re really nice!”

## Resources and references

* Menstrual cup use, leakage, acceptability, safety and availability: a systematic review and meta-analysis : The Lancet Vol 4, Issue 8 August 01, 2019 E376-E393 Anna Maria van Eijk, Garazi Zulaika, Madeline Lenchner, Linda Mason, Muthusamy Sivakami, Elizabeth Nyothach et al. Open Access: **THE LANCET, Public Health DOI: https//.doi.org/10.1016/S2468-2667(19)30111-2**
* <https://www.actionaid.org.uk/blog/2022/05/18/period-poverty-statistics-around-world>
* [https://www.nationalgeographic.com/environment/article/how-tampons-pads-became-unsustainable-story-of-plastic](https://protect-eu.mimecast.com/s/MRFsC9gRZIkYKBmTQoYcT?domain=nationalgeographic.com)
* [Zerowastescotland.org.uk/research-evidence/carbon](https://protect-eu.mimecast.com/s/8UZEC4LEZsB7W1JCVsKJR?domain=zerowastescotland.org.uk)
* <https://www.wen.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Fact-Sheet-Environmenstrual.pdf>
* <https://sustainablehealthcare.org.uk/what-we-do/sustainable-specialties/occupational-therapy>
* <https://www.who.int/news/item/11-10-2021-who-s-10-calls-for-climate-action>
* [The Lancet Countdown on health and climate change](https://www.thelancet.com/countdown-health-climate)

## Want to know more?

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* Location & NHS Region if within the UK: **London/Sussex**
* Partner organisations involved: GOSH/Greener NHS/Healthier Futures Action Fund
* Has this project or story been made public in any form before?Yes – poster for several conferences, presentations for conference.

If available, please provide details of an additional contact to best enable others interested in your project to reach you in future.