Can we use behavioural economics to increase patient adherence?
Changing behaviour, changing lives
Patient-centric strategies. They’re what we’re all aiming for. We want to better support the patients taking our medications. To go ‘beyond the pill’ to deliver to their broader needs.

But could we do more?
One of the biggest issues our industry faces is that patients often don’t comply – with medication, with dietary advice, with lifestyle advice. Patients are people and don’t always make ‘sensible’ decisions or act in their own best interests. We know that decisions are often unconscious and emotional and may be influenced by the behaviour of those around us. But if we now recognize how fallible our decision-making is, can we use this knowledge to our advantage?

Behavioural economics is increasingly recognised as a framework that helps explain why people do what they do. We now understand much more about how decisions are made, in real life by real people, and the inherent biases humans are subject to in their decision-making.

So can we draw on this understanding to encourage ‘better’ behaviour in the patients taking our medications?
CASE STUDY

Using behavioural economics to change behaviour in Type 2 Diabetes patients

To investigate this question, in partnership with The Behavioural Architects we conducted a case study in Type 2 Diabetes.

The question was simple...

Could we trigger a positive change in behaviour with an intervention based on behavioural economics?
How we did it?

We conducted primary research among healthcare practitioners and patients to better understand the issues.

This research was fed into a workshop comprising medics, academics and researchers.

This workshop resulted in a range of hypotheses to help explain poor adherence with medication and lifestyle advice.

These behaviours and hypotheses were then considered in the context of behavioural economics. We identified numerous biases which held potential for intervention.
How can we encourage people to stick with their commitments?

It’s very easy to make commitments when we’re in a cold, rational zone... but how often do we do so and find that our commitment wanes when we are exposed to temptation (the hot emotional zone)? People very often choose to discount the future and prefer the enjoyment of the here and now.

Have you sometimes felt that a task is just too big.... and there is very little reward for your efforts? Patients are often asked to dramatically change their diet and activity levels as well as adhere to medication, which can seem like an insurmountable task. As we all know... change is hard.

Disease may be interpreted as a very personal issue, with patients sometimes overlooking the impact on—and the potential positive power—of a supporter in helping them achieve their goals.

How can we make the task more achievable and provide people with the positive feedback we all crave to keep us motivated?

How can we enlist the support of a loved one and prime patients to change their behaviour?
Building on these insights, we developed a motivational poster to encourage positive lifestyle changes. Each poster was personalised with imagery of a loved one and the patient's own specific lifestyle goals, and signed by the patient and a supporter.
**The experiment**

We worked with a group of 26 patients with Type 2 Diabetes. All the patients found it difficult to adhere to the recommended lifestyle changes and to take their medication as directed. Each day, we monitored their adherence to medication, diet and exercise advice via Hall & Partners’ YourWord mobile app. Results were recorded for a control period of 2 weeks – and again for 2 weeks after receiving the motivational poster.
So did it work?

In a word... yes.

+45% Incidences of patients eating a ‘healthy’ diet increased by 45%

+51% Incidences of patients adopting ‘healthy’ activity levels increased by 51%

7 out of 10 respondents showed an improvement in adherence
So what does this case study tell us? It tells us that we need to consider all the drivers of human behaviour... not just the ‘logical’ ones. It tells us that we can use this knowledge to change behaviour. It tell us that with a relatively simple intervention we can make a positive difference to people’s lives... changing people’s lives for the better.

“It was good to have a visible incentive to look at every day”

“I didn’t want to be seen as having failed, so it did make me try that bit harder and this week I lost 4 lbs”

“It did help me because when I was actually picking which sticker to use I did NOT want to pick a sad face!”
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