

# Implementation of a new digital exercise tool in Axial Spondyloarthritis and the MSK Therapy Outpatient Department: a Service Evaluation

Jacqui Tomkins, Rheumatology Specialist Physiotherapist; Brendan Whyte, Rotational Physiotherapist; Dinny Wallis, Consultant Rheumatologist



**Axial SpA works silently. We don't.**

## BACKGROUND

Providing exercise advice is a stated aim in national and international recommendations for the management of axial spondyloarthritis (axSpA) and other inflammatory rheumatic diseases. Previous audits within the UHS Rheumatology department had identified that patients with axSpA had not always received timely and accessible advice about self-management.

As axSpA patients are often treated with immunosuppressive medication, attending community exercise facilities or hospital therapy department became unsafe during 2020-2021.

With virtual consultations becoming a new way of working in the longer term as part of the NHS digital plan and further due to Covid-19, it was more essential than ever to find ways to support patients to self-manage their symptoms and improve their health and well-being.

A previous survey carried out in 2019 identified that 36 out of 100 patients attending the MSK therapy outpatient department wished to be given information digitally.

These points led to the need to provide exercise advice to patients with axSpA in digital format.

## OBJECTIVES

To introduce a new digital exercise tool and, one year on, carry out a service evaluation to look at its use and compare our results to those findings from the previous survey.

## METHODS

- July 2020, Physiotec introduced into the rheumatology and MSK therapy outpatient department, following successful applications to Novartis and UCB for funding
- Physiotec data analysed between July 2020 and July 2021
- Emails sent to patient users of Physiotec to understand their views of it
- Paper & online surveys sent to patients attending the therapy department to understand their views
- Online survey sent to therapists to discover their views of Physiotec and how we give information to patients

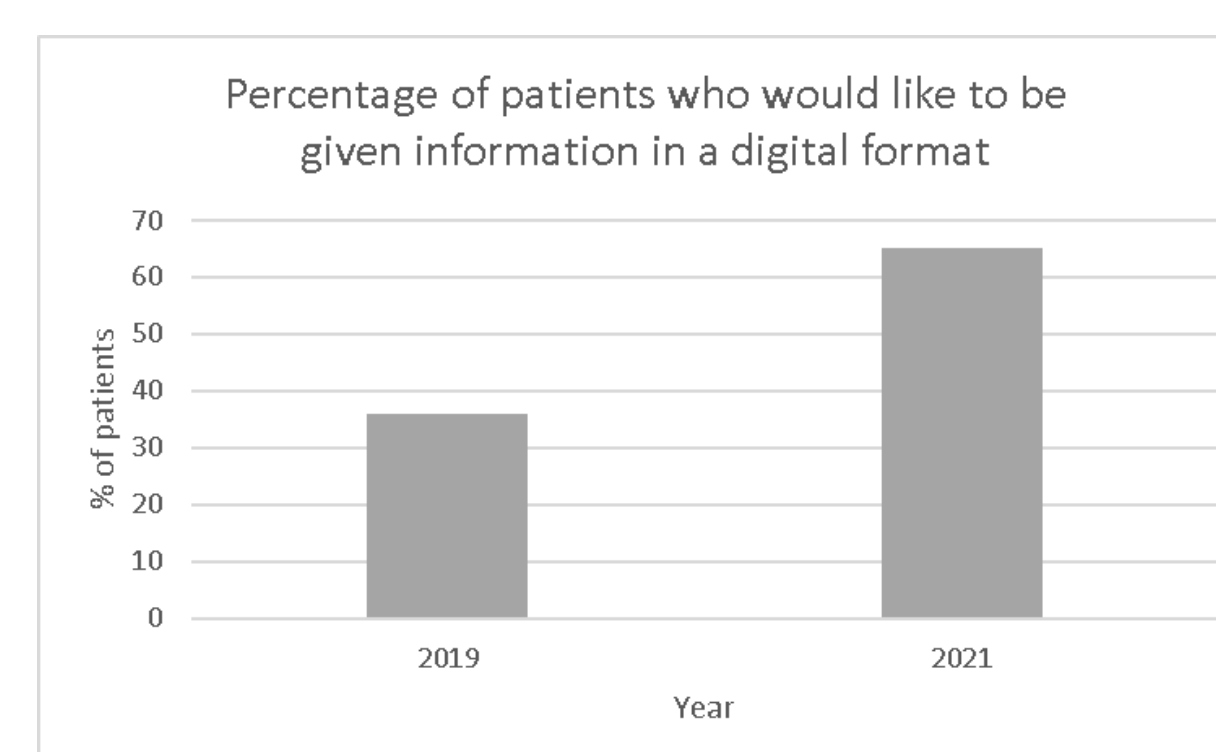
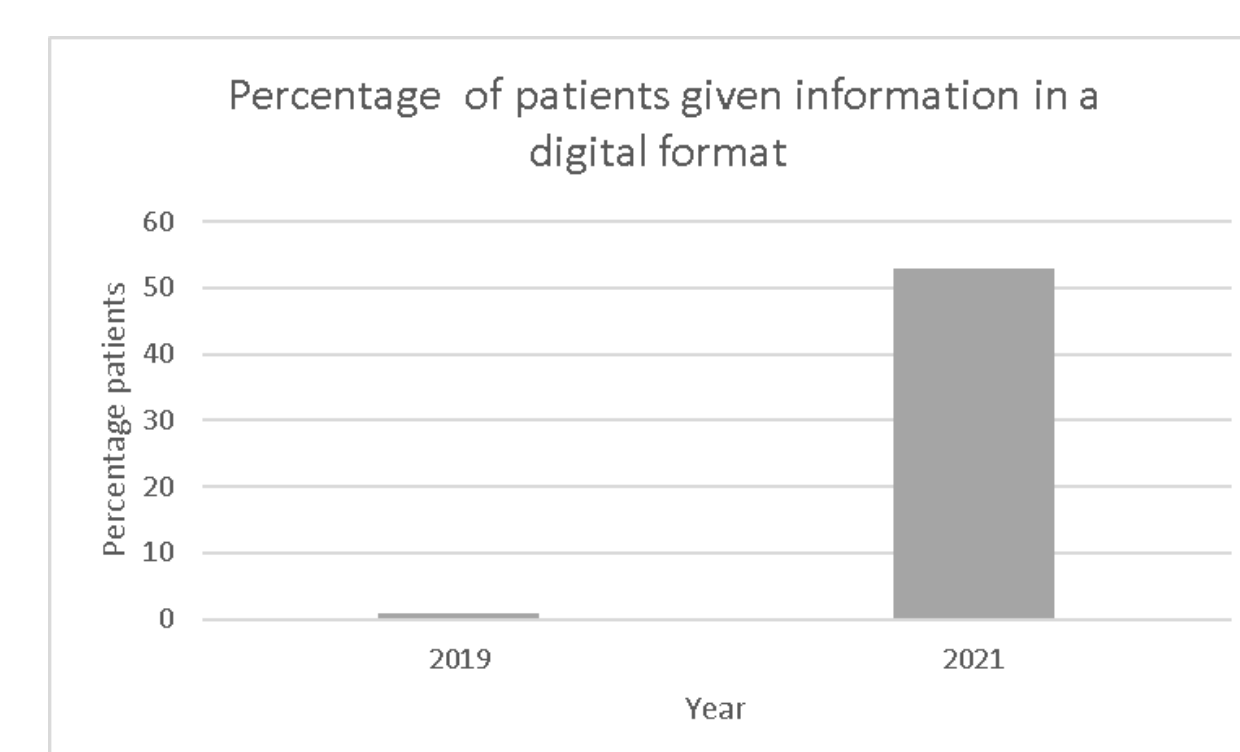
## RESULTS

- 41 therapists had used Physiotec, with 28 users allowed to use it at any one time
- 21 out of 28 therapists had logged on in the previous 30 days
- 3245 exercise programs had been created in total with 2553 clients
- Number of clients per physio ranged from 0 (3 therapists) to 217; mean 58; median 40

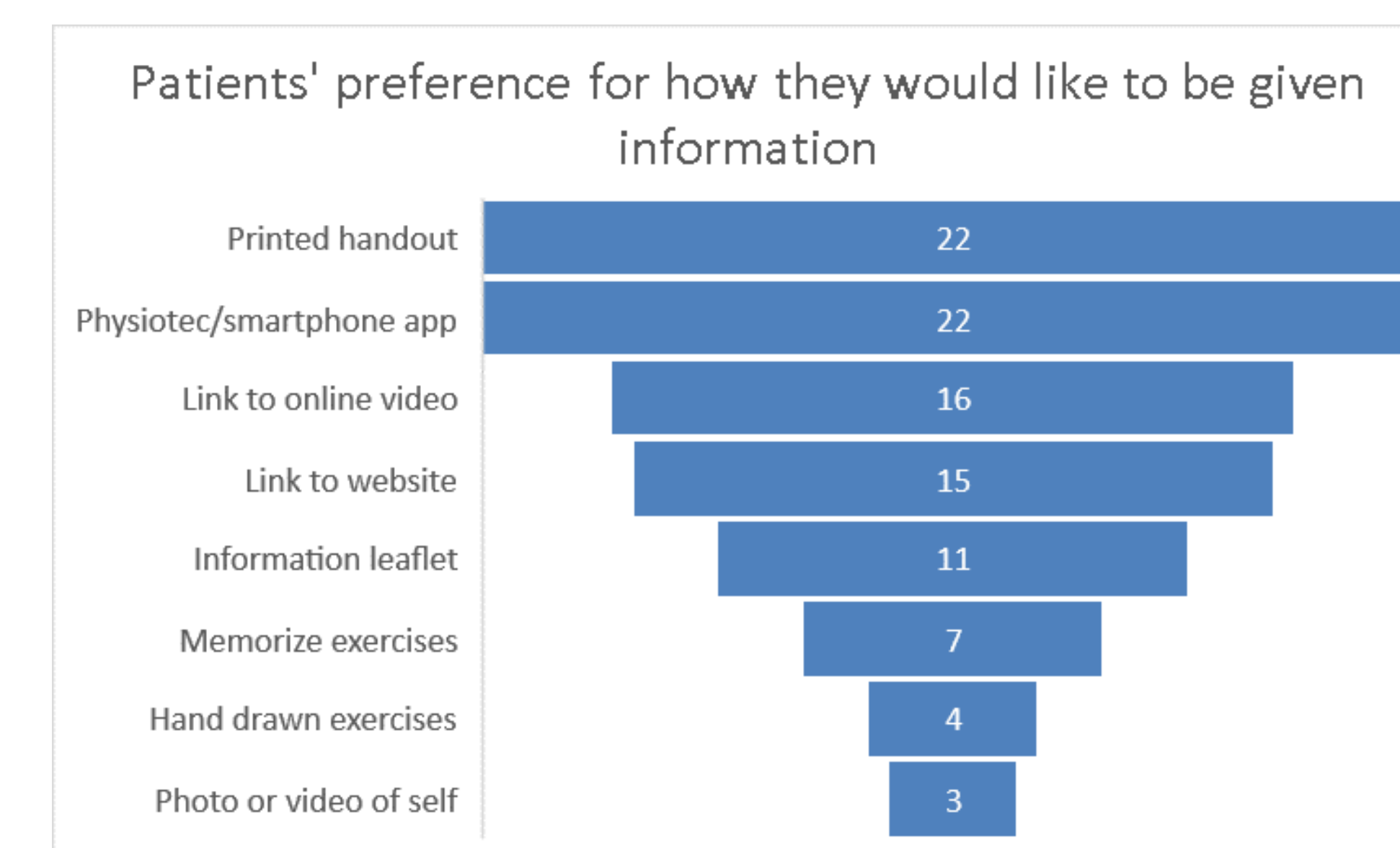
## RESULTS – PATIENTS VIEWS

- 11 email responses from patients using Physiotec
- Feedback from users:
  - “It is absolutely first class”
  - “It is easy to understand”
  - “Seeing exercises in action is more beneficial”
  - “It helps me to ensure I am doing my exercises correctly”
  - “It is easier than a bit of paper or memory”
  - “It is a great prompt”
  - “It is good for the environment”
  - “Exercises can be tailored to our individual needs & not just generic exercises on a piece of paper”
  - “It provides clear written and illustrative instructions”
  - “It is easy to access on a phone”
  - “People can be reminded of their exercises anywhere as there is no paperwork to carry around”

- 68 responses to the patient surveys
- Physiotec used equally across all mediums of therapy consultation – face to face, virtual and telephone
- Number of patients who had been given information in a digital format had risen from 1% in 2019 to 53% in 2021



- Number of patients who requested they would like information to be given in a digital format had risen from 36% in 2019 to 65% in 2021
- 32% specifically requested an app such as Physiotec



## RESULTS – THERAPISTS VIEWS

- 24 therapist responses to survey
- 1 out of 24 had never used it
- 2 out of 24 were not using it currently
- 100% of therapists agreed or strongly agreed that Physiotec needs to continue and gave it a 4.5 out of 5 star rating
- Positive feedback from therapists:
  - “It is quick and easy to use”
  - “More time can be spent on advice & treatment rather than teaching exercises as there are videos of exercises”
  - “There is a good variety of exercises”
  - “It helps new therapists with treatment plans”
  - “There are superior features to previously used digital exercise tools”
  - “It is easy to print off a handout for patients”
- Negative feedback from therapists:
  - “It is quicker to give a printed handout in hand clinic for general hand and wrist fractures exercises”
  - “Certain exercises are not listed”
  - “Technology issues”

## CONCLUSION

In the last 2 years there has been an increased requirement for patient information to be given digitally. In response, we implemented a digital exercise tool for axSpA patients which, following its successful use and the desire to extend the benefits to a wider patient population, was rolled out to the MSK outpatient therapists for use. It was found to be highly valued amongst patients and therapists. There are still a proportion of patients who would like information to be given in other formats and patient choice remains at the heart of how we deliver our services at University Hospital Southampton.

We will re-evaluate in 2 years time to decide whether or not to re-apply for more funding for continued use of Physiotec in the future, specifically looking at patient preference and therapist usage.