

A Service Evaluation Of Clinicians Writing Clinic Letters To Patients



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- BACKGROUND -

Good Medical Practice (2020) states: *'You must give patients the information they want or need to know in a way they can understand. You should make sure that arrangements are made, wherever possible, to meet patients' language and communication needs.'* [1] Writing clinic letters directed to the patient could be considered part of a strategy to implement a **person-centred approach** by giving patients more **autonomy** and **aiding their understanding** of their assessment and care plan.

The Academy of Medical Royal Colleges (2018) released guidance on how to write outpatient clinic letters directly to the patient. The benefits given include **strengthening the doctor-patient relationship**, providing a summary and record of the appointment *that the patient can understand*, **empowering the patient** to correct any information included and **enabling them to share the information** with family, carers or other professionals with ease. In addition, they suggest that writing letters to **patients improves communication between the clinician and patient** and **their awareness of their treatment and care planning**. [2]

- AIMS and OBJECTIVES -

What did we do?

- An Audit of current practices
- A Survey of clinician attitudes

Why did we do it?

- To determine who clinic letters are being addressed to
- To find out whether they are being written in a suitable language
- To explore the barriers to improving clinic letter writing.

- METHODS -

WE REVIEWED

- 150 clinic appointment letters in two community mental health teams

WE COLLECTED DATA ON

- Who the clinic letter was written to (patient/GP)
- Whether the patient had been copied into the letter, and if not why?
- Flesch Readability score to determine their reading ease.

FLESCH SCORE	GRADE LEVEL	APPROX. AGE	READABILITY
90 to 100	5th Grade	Age 10-11	Very Easy to Read
80 to 90	6th Grade	Age 11-12	Easy to Read
70 to 80	7th Grade	Age 12-13	Fairly Easy to Read
60 to 70	8th and 9th Grade	Age 13-15	Plain English
50 to 60	10th to 12th Grade	Age 15-17	Fairly Difficult to Read
30 to 50	University	Age 18+	Difficult to Read
0 to 30	University Graduate		Very Difficult to Read

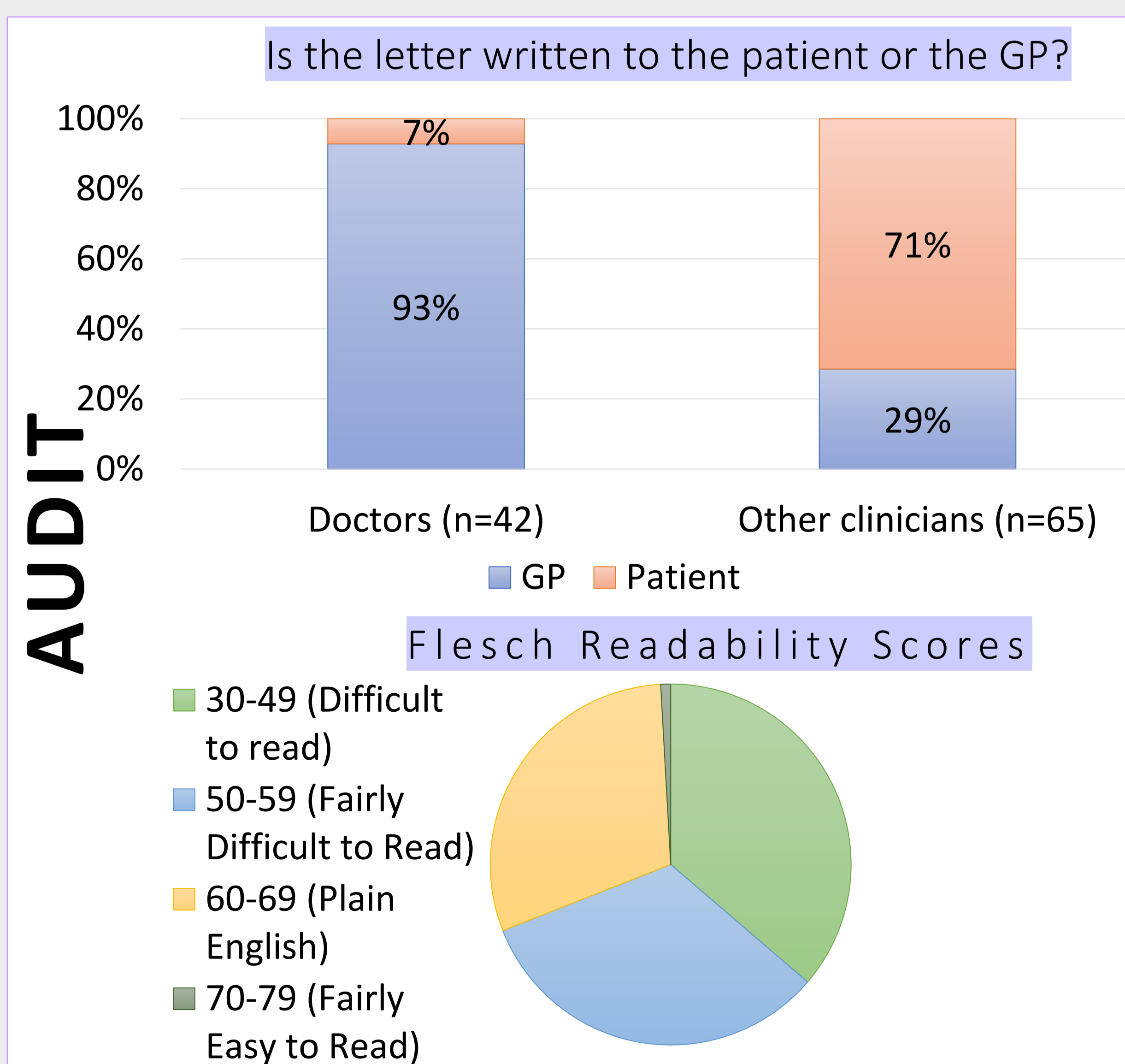
Flesch Readability Scores. Adapted from Spadaro et al [3]

What is the Flesch Readability Score?

A tool that uses word and sentence length to analyse the readability of a piece of text, and the tool recommended for use to analyse letters in the AOMRC guidelines. Each score was calculated using the add on tool available on Microsoft Word.

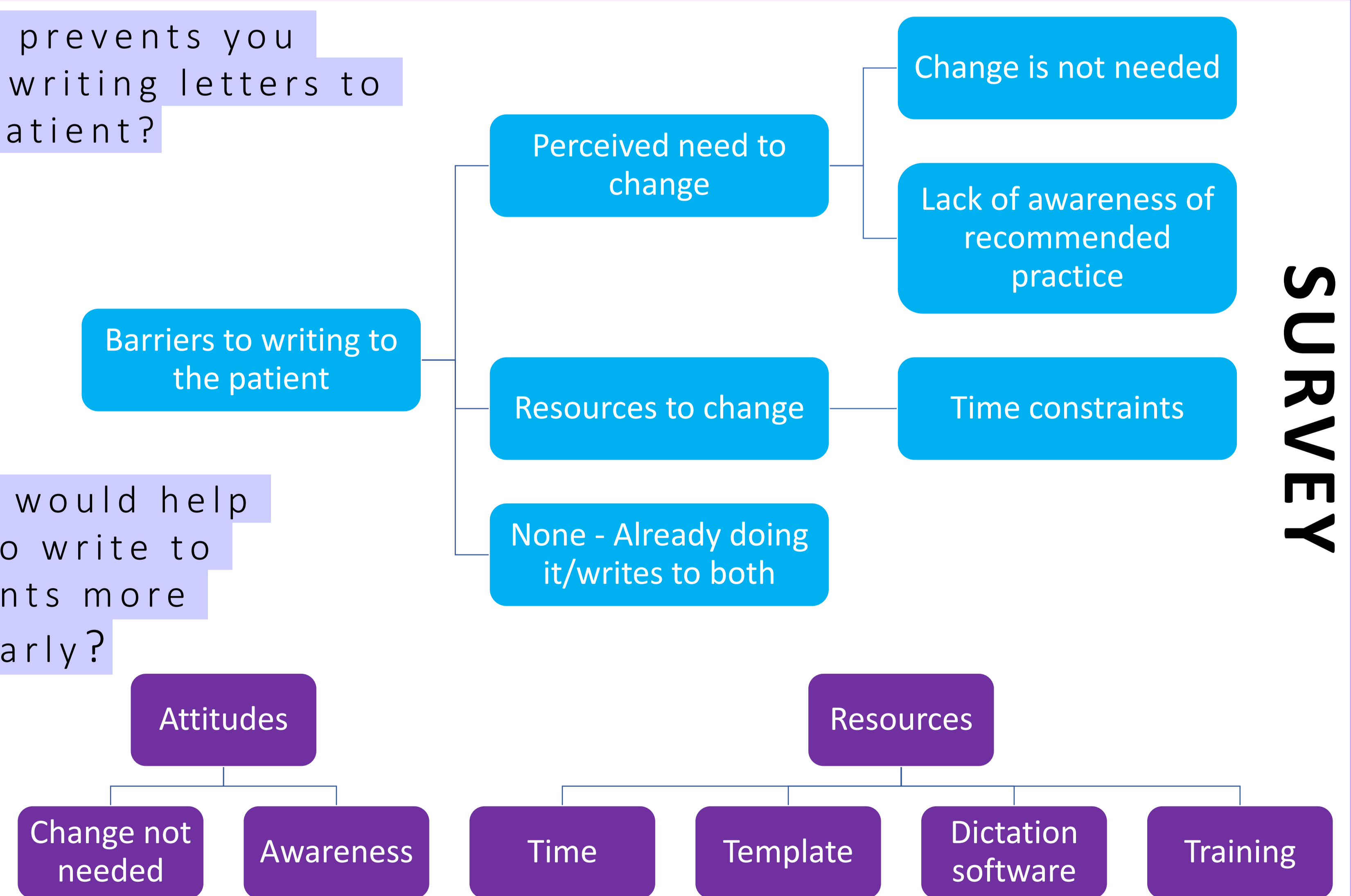
Following the initial audit, we carried out the clinician survey in the same community teams.

- RESULTS -



What prevents you from writing letters to the patient?

What would help you to write to patients more regularly?



- CONCLUSIONS -

There has been variable practice amongst clinicians for whom their clinic letters are directed to. Most letters in our sample were not easy to read and this could be considered suboptimal for the target population. Training in clinic letter writing directed to the patient and the development of purposefully designed clinic letter templates are ways that we could help facilitate improvement in this practice and promote a cultural shift that puts person-centered care at the forefront.

- REFERENCES -

1. General Medical Council. Good Medical Practice. 2020.
2. Academy of Medical Royal Colleges. Please, write to me. Writing outpatient clinic letters to patients. Guidance. London; 2018 Sep.
3. Spadaro DC, Robinson LA, Smith LT. Assessing readability of patient information materials. Am J Hosp Pharm. 1980 Feb;37(2):215-21.

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