

CLAHRCBITE

Brokering Innovation Through Evidence

Evaluating an online consultation system in GP practices



GP workloads and patient appointment waiting times are increasing. NHS England is investing £45 million in implementing online consultation systems in GP practices, aiming to improve patient access to health advice and reduce the use of face-to-face GP appointments.

We evaluated one such system called eConsult, a web-based platform that patients access from their GP practice's website. It enables patients to complete a questionnaire and submit their symptoms online to a GP (called an e-consultation).

The system also provides self-help, advice and signposting to 111, pharmacy or local services for common conditions seen by GPs.

What we did

NIHR CLAHRC West, in collaboration with the [One Care Consortium](#), evaluated the effectiveness, acceptability and impact of implementing eConsult in thirty-six GP practices in Bristol, South Gloucestershire and North Somerset between April 2015 and June 2016. Our evaluation used:

- website usage statistics
- patient surveys
- electronic medical record data about the actions taken by the practice following an e-consultation
- practice staff interviews

What we found

Most e-consultations were on weekdays and during working hours. Self-help advice was more likely to be accessed in the evening.

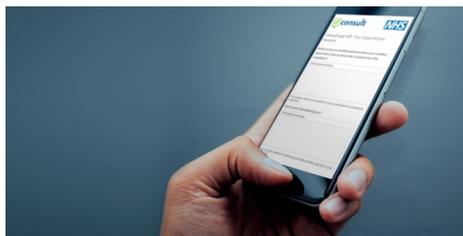
Most patients said they valued the system. Some patients said they used e-consultations to avoid a GP appointment to try to save time for themselves and their GPs, while others used e-consultations when they could not get a timely face-to-face appointment.

GPs highlighted that e-consultations could be difficult as they didn't allow real-time interaction with patients. This reduced GPs' ability to understand and evaluate patients' symptoms and concerns because they weren't able to follow up and clarify. It also undermined patients' ability to explore treatment options and engage in shared decision-making.

The system did save some patients from having a face-to-face appointment.

However, GPs often needed more information when processing an e-consultation and had to make direct contact with 70 per cent of patients, either by telephone or face-to-face. GPs felt that this duplicated their workload.

Online consultations need to be carefully implemented and effectively marketed to yield benefits. Our evaluation found that e-consultations worked best for simple and routine enquiries that didn't need a follow up appointment, such as repeat prescriptions, test results or follow-up advice for ongoing conditions. But they can't replace face-to-face consultations when diagnosing new or complex symptoms.



Read the papers

[Use of a primary care online consultation system, by whom, when and why: evaluation of a pilot observational study in 36 general practices in South West England](#)

H Edwards, E Marques, W Hollingworth, J Horwood, M Farr, E Bernard, C Salisbury, K Northstone (2017)
BMJ Open 7:e016901

[The use of electronic consultation in primary care: views and experiences from general practice](#)

J Banks, M Farr, K Northstone, E Bernard, C Salisbury, H Edwards, J Horwood (2018)
British Journal of General Practice 68 (666): e1-e8.

[Implementing online consultations in primary care: a mixed-method evaluation extending normalisation process theory through service coproduction](#)

M Farr, J Banks, H Edwards, K Northstone, E Bernard, C Salisbury, J Horwood (2018)
BMJ Open e019966

Find out more

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