

Briefing paper to the Health and Social Wellbeing Overview and Scrutiny Commission
Wards: All

13th April 2018

ONLINE CONSULTATION IN PRIMARY CARE EVALUATION

Briefing Paper of the Head of Primary Care, NHS Hull Clinical Commissioning Group.

1 Purpose

The purpose of this report is to provide the Overview and Scrutiny Commission with an update on the implementation of an online consultation tool in primary care called 'eConsult' and the results of a recently conducted independent evaluation.

2 Background

In 2016 NHS Hull CCG made a successful bid to the NHS England Estates and Technology Transformation Fund to trial an online consultation system which provides patients with free online consultation with their GP Practice through the GP practice's website. Patients submit their symptoms online through a secure form any time of day or night, 7 days a week. There is no need to login or enter passwords, patients enter their name, date of birth, address and confirm they are registered with the practice. The system makes it clear that it is not for emergencies or urgent symptoms such as chest pain. Should a patient enter such symptoms the system red flags and tells the patient to go to A&E or ring 111. Once the online form is completed and submitted securely, the practice then has a commitment to respond within two working days. The response could be a telephone consultation, prescription, booking an appointment with a nurse or GP, being signposted to another service, or being advised what to do next. Patients can also submit administrative enquiries such as requests for referral letters or fit notes. There is also an option for self-help which directs people to appropriate online advice through NHS Choices.

Implementation began in April 2017 across 21 GP Practices in Hull and licenses expire in June 2018. Promotion of the system has included:

- posters and leaflets
- banners in surgeries
- text messages
- presentations to community groups and patient participation groups
- a banner on each participating GP website
- a three week radio advertising campaign
- local press
- Twitter, Facebook and YouTube videos
- extensively talking to patients in the waiting area and demonstrations using an iPad

As part of the General Practice Forward View, national funding is available to CCGs to support the costs for practices to utilise online consultation systems, improving access to primary care and making best use of clinicians' time.

3 Staff and Patient Survey

In order to understand the effectiveness of the online consultation system the CCG commissioned an independent evaluation. This set out to:

- Measure effectiveness for the GP Practice
- Measure satisfaction with both staff and patients
- Measure awareness

The primary research was undertaken with patients and GP practice staff using a mixed method approach. This included:

- An in-surgery and online self-completion questionnaire completed by 1,334 patients. 1,231 with patients from practices that had eConsult and 103 from two practices that did not have eConsult (control group)
- A semi-structured interview with GP practice staff, conducted online and by telephone
- Depth interviews with six eConsult users and case studies of patients who had used eConsult both successfully and unsuccessfully.

The results presented in this report are from the draft evaluation received at the end of March 2018.

4 Results of evaluation

4.1 Usage

During the period 10th April 2017 to 28th February 2018 there were 7,211 unique visits to the practice websites. There were 1,814 online consultations submitted.

Usage Data	
	Count
Unique visitors	7,211
Self-help visits	668
Pharmacy self-help visits	296
Callback provider visits	196
eConsults submitted	1,814
eConsults diverted	58

The estimated number of appointments saved by eConsult was 1,088. If eConsult had not been available most patients said they would have made a face to face appointment (46%), others said they would have requested a telephone discussion (21%), gone to the pharmacy (13%), gone to a walk-in centre (8%), done nothing/something else (12%)

When asked 35% of those who had used online consultation said it was due to having to wait too long for an appointment and 33% said they wanted to try it as an alternative. Other people said:

- *“Did not want to waste doctor’s time when other patients could have an appointment.”*
- *“Recommended by reception.”*
- *“To order repeat prescriptions”*
- *“Was trying to avoid coming out.”*

The top ten conditions submitted through eConsult were:

- Depression
- Back pain
- Cough
- Earache
- Cold or flu
- Anxiety
- Foot pain
- Cystitis
- Sore throat
- Hayfever

35% of eConsult users were male and 65% of eConsult users were female. Respondents who had used eConsult were significantly more likely to be limited in their day-to-day activities due to a health problems or disability than respondents who had not used eConsult.

Respondents aged 65 and over and respondents who were not working were more likely to have not used eConsult because they do not have access to the internet. A large proportion (over 40%) of those who were aware the system was available in their practice had not used eConsult because they had not needed to.

4.2 Staff Satisfaction

Staff were asked about their overall satisfaction with e-consult, on a scale of 0-10. The mean score for the twelve practices surveyed was 6.4

Participants with the higher satisfaction levels (8 and above) highlighted:

"an efficient facility for patients and staff"

"I think the uptake has been good, it's been well publicised by the surgery and we've got a system in place to handle the workload."

Those who gave lower scores for the system raised a number of issues, but mainly around the low uptake of the system by both staff, and patients. Some stated that they were not satisfied with the system as patient uptake had been very low:

"even though it has been well advertised", a key issue was failing to encourage practice staff to "take eConsult on board".

Staff generally agreed that the main benefits to patients using eConsult included the ability to raise queries twenty-four hours per day, direct and faster access to clinicians and reduced or eliminated time waiting to speak to their practice on the telephone. It was considered particularly helpful for non-urgent conditions, as one participant explained:

"For some patients with non-urgent conditions and queries it's a convenient tool and saves time." Another participant agreed: "I think patients who can determine the difference between urgent and non-urgent can really benefit from it because it's an effective way of communicating your condition without having to ring up and come in and wait."

There was also an indication that eConsult helped to overcome barriers to treatment for some patients for more 'personal' issues:

"It's also very good for tackling some of the stigma - we've had STI concerns, worries about pregnancies - lots of people who would have found it difficult to come in and talk about them without being able to address it first in a way that's a little less personal."

4.3 Patient Satisfaction

Satisfaction with eConsult amongst patients was generally more positive than negative.

Some patients believed their experience of using eConsult was a success as they were satisfied with the overall outcome. As one participant explained:

"Everything was fine as far as I was concerned. I know it might not suit everyone doing it this way but I'm happy with it, I like doing it like that online, hundred percent."

One participant also felt that the system was helpful as a learning tool:

"It certainly made me more aware of possible future symptoms which I think is very useful."

The main reason patients felt it did not meet their needs was that they did not receive a reply to their response in the stated time frame and therefore delayed their access to a GP or health professional.

4.4 Saving time

Two participants said that they saved time by using eConsult. One man said:

“Well it saved me a journey and the hassle of getting down there 'cos it's difficult for me with the mobility, I can hardly walk. When I go down there it's only a quick chat with them anyway, discussing the medication, so it helped to do it online and like that it saves everybody time.”

Two participants felt using eConsult occupied more of their time than if they would have booked an appointment at their GP practice. One woman explained: *“In my case it didn't save me time, it actually took longer, and it was the first and last time I've used it.”*

Overall, however, participants largely agreed that the eConsult system appeared to have the potential to save them or others time, as one woman explained:

It didn't save me any time on this occasion but ultimately I could see that it could save people time in the future if it worked better.” Another participant stated: *“Under normal circumstances - perhaps a cold, flu, that sort of thing - then I do think it would have saved time.”*

4.5 Saving money

One participant believed using eConsult had saved him money as a result of reduced travel costs: *“Every time I go to the doctors I've got to get a taxi or when I go to hospital I have to have two ambulance men to help me into the ward so on that occasion it saved me the money of a taxi.”*

4.6 Improvements

The key area for improvement raised by patients was around the need for more consistent and faster responses to patients using eConsult. Participants stressed the importance of addressing the medical conditions of patients promptly in order to encourage uptake and demonstrate the credibility of the service.

Dissatisfaction mainly resulted from the practice not calling the patient back within the specified time frame. Amongst those who would recommend the system, ease of use, speed and time saving (for both the patient and the practice) were seen as key benefits.

5 Summary

Given time, it is likely that usage of eConsult will increase. When asked about using eConsult in the future 55% of respondents from GP practices using eConsult were very or fairly interested in using it in the future and 43% of respondents from the control practices that were not using eConsult were very or fairly interested in using

eConsult in the future. Future adopters of the system are more likely to be women, those in younger age groups and those in employment.

The survey of patients highlights two expected barriers to its use - a preference for face-to-face consultation, and internet access, supporting the CCG's assumption that online consultation is not for everyone but gives a choice in accessing primary care, particularly for people who have busy lives, and for those who may find it more difficult to make a journey into the practice.

The eConsult system appeared to be more successful at practices that had implemented it with clear processes and systems to ensure that all staff, from administrators to GPs were clear about their roles and how to respond to eConsult requests.

The practices which were positive about eConsult and its potential future use were generally the ones with higher uptake and had qualified nursing staff in place willing and able to handle the eConsult requests.

Practice staff also noted the system is an 'add-on' as opposed to an integral part of a triaging system. It has therefore been recommended by Practice Managers that the online consultation system be integrated into clinical systems at practices in order to encourage use. In those practices with low uptake, continued promotion and training of staff needs to be in place.

There appear to be a number of issues for patients, in particular, the need for a response to requests, and for the question sets used to avoid repetition so that they are easier and quicker to use. Whilst there is obviously a need for the right information to be collected to make the clinical judgement necessary, usability needs to be at the forefront of future developments to the system for both patients and staff alike.

Online consultation is clearly a system in its infancy but it offers clear benefits for some groups of patients. It remains a key national policy driver to improve access to general practice and requires a greater period of time for further development.

6 Next Steps

Based on the findings from the evaluation the CCG will be further engaging with practices, both those that do offer online consultation and those that do not currently offer online consultation, to explore the best ways to further develop and increase utilisation of online consultation as part of wider plans of improving access to primary care within the city.

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