

NEW WAYS TO WORK IN GENERAL PRACTICE

New types of consultation

eConsult is an online triage and consultation tool. Approaching its 6th year, it gives patients access to self-help, allows them to complete administrative tasks such as requesting a sick/fit note remotely, and makes it easier for GPs to assess what medical care the patient needs. Hedge End Medical Centre is one of a growing number of practices seeing its benefits, with a Care Quality Commission quality report praising its online services.

Hedge End, like many practices across the country, saw demand for appointments with clinicians increase. They had successfully taken measures previously to meet demand, which worked well. Faced with losing a salaried doctor, the practice decided to partly replace the sessions through using eConsult. Jennie Dock, Practice Manager at Hedge End Medical Centre, came

across eConsult at a conference. Meanwhile, Dr Karl Graham, a partner at the practice, had heard about the portal from a separate conference, and so together they persuaded the team of partners at the practice to invest in one year of the platform. One year later, Hedge End has decided to continue using the portal.

eConsult was developed by the Hurley Group of fifteen practices in London as an internal scheme to help provide primary care in a timely manner. Following its success, it spread to practices in Tower Hamlets and then across the UK, with over 300 practices now using it. The company is made up of a clinical team and a technical team, working closely with EMIS Health.

X The problem

Three years ago, Hedge End changed its on-day system from a duty nurse to a duty team. The duty team operated a triage list which ensured that those with the greatest need could be seen on the day. Meanwhile, the practice continued to accept pre-bookable appointments.

While the system worked well, demand continued to increase and appointments became more difficult to book, increasing stress for both receptionists and patients. The system worked up to an 'at capacity' level which saw all of Monday's appointments being booked within the first 45 minutes of the practice opening.

"Receptionists liked being able to say 'yes' to people asking for appointments," Jennie comments. "Until they had to start saying 'no' more often."

✓ Solving the problem

Having persuaded the team to try using online consultations for a year, Hedge End Medical Centre now needed to embed it as a core way of working for the future. The practice paid for the service using money that would otherwise have been spent on paying one session a week of a salaried doctor. As the service is simply added on to a practice's website, the crucial implementation step is making

sure that the new service is well-publicised and well-used. Hedge End produced leaflets and flyers, as well as putting a banner on their website to notify patients of the platform. EMIS Health provides all the publicity materials.

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Jennie Dock, Practice Manager at Hedge End Medical Centre

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How it works

When a patient accesses the portal on their practice’s website, they will be asked what they want.



1 Need advice about a specific problem or condition?

If this option is chosen, the patient will be navigated to a list of over 100 common medical problems. When they identify their problem, they will be asked if they want to access self-help and advice or whether they would like to consult with their doctor. If they want access to self-help and advice, a page will load that will explain what the problem is and how the patient can treat the symptom, if appropriate. If they consult with their doctor, this may result in a prescription or advice, and avoid a face to face appointment.

2 Unsure what your symptoms mean?


If a patient is unsure what the problem is or would like advice from their GP, they can fill in a form on the platform, which initially asks them what they want to achieve out of the consultation (e.g. a face-to-face appointment), and then asks them to describe their symptoms in as much detail as possible. GPs can close the majority of these consultations down without the patient having to come into the surgery.



3 Need to request test results, sick note, referral letter or medical report?

The patient will fill in a form, explain what they want (e.g. sick note, GP letter) and explain why.


The practice will receive a PDF of the request and deal with it accordingly. At Hedge End, the practice manager and organisational manager receive the requests and pass them on to the appropriate person, whether GP, nurse practitioner or administrative staff.

 **Has it worked?**

Hedge End are using online consultations to deal with administrative queries that can quickly be resolved with minimal involvement from the GP. Patients requesting sick/fit notes now have those dealt with via the system, while patients who previously called up the practice to check on the status of referrals and prescriptions can now save time by using the online consultation service.

The change has also meant that doctors spend less time dealing with patients that do not need, or want, a face-to-face appointment. One of the very first questions that patients are asked when using the platform to seek something from the practice is 'Tell us how we can help you.' Dr Graham said, "The great thing about eConsult is that it gives us an idea of what the patient wants. This makes it easier for us to live up to their expectations."

For 12 months, Hedge End paid the equivalent of paying a salaried doctor for one session a week per year. "For it to be worth the money," Dr Graham notes, "we needed to save 18 appointments a week. The eConsult team sends us weekly data reports, estimating we save between 55-80 appointments each week. The system is paying for itself three times over – it's amazing!"

 **Learning along the way**

When the requests from eConsult are emailed through to the practice, they are processed by Jennie and the organisational manager to determine who in the practice is best placed to handle them. With feedback and training from the team, this approach now results in 95% of face to face appointments being judged by the clinician to have been with the most appropriate person, which compares very favourably with estimates of 80% from national studies. One lesson has been that staff processing incoming requests should handle


sufficient volumes to be able to develop their proficiency, or else too many contacts are sent to a GP inappropriately. In future, the practice intends to have a nurse practitioner processing incoming requests from the online consultation system.

 **Getting the most out of the system**

Both eConsult and Hedge End Medical Centre agree that use of the portal requires commitment and trust in the algorithm. Dr Murray Ellender, Chief Executive of eConsult and GP Partner at the Hurley Group of practices that initially set up the system, said, "Without commitment, it's just a useful online platform. You might have one or two people using it, but unless you publicise it, you won't see enough benefit." This was the experience with Hedge End, which initially saw only 2-3 patients use the

platform a week.

Hedge End Medical Centre moved to a process in which receptionists would encourage people who called in to first fill in the online form to determine the most appropriate person to be booked with and whether it could be dealt with on the telephone. Patients were told that it would ultimately save the patients' time, they won't have to wait in the queue for the phone to be answered, and if they've submitted a consultation overnight, staff will be able to call you before the practice opens its doors.

 "Without commitment, it's just a useful online platform."

Dr Murray Ellender at Hedge End Medical Centre

 **Is it safe?**

eConsult is a platform developed by GPs for GPs, points out Dr Ellender. The self-help section of the platform contains pages on common illnesses, syndicated from the NHS Choices website. These guides allow patients to check their own symptoms, give guidance on how to self-help if appropriate, and advise on when and if they should seek an appointment with a GP. The portal can also signpost patients to alternative primary care providers, such as NHS111 or a local pharmacy. Research shows that GPs judge at least 7% of their consultations could have been better handled by the patient attending a pharmacy.

If a patient wants to use eConsult to contact their medical practice, the system is also safe for use. After filling in their contact details, patients will be asked what help they are seeking and asked to describe their symptoms. They are also able to attach photos, if relevant, for even more accurate

help. If a patient answers a question in a way that may indicate that the problem is urgent and cannot wait for a GP appointment, the platform will prevent further information being included and urge the patient to take immediate action, which could be calling the practice for an emergency appointment, calling NHS111, or visiting A&E.

The questions on the form have been written by GPs and will intuitively react to the answers inputted with the questions a GP likely would ask in a face-to-face appointment. Therefore, as well as being a useful tool alone, it means that, if a face-to-face appointment is required, a GP will be able to understand the problem much more quickly.

It has been found that a GP can read and action 2-3 online consultation requests in the time it would take for one face-to-face appointment (10 minutes). This saves time in the day and allows for either more patients to be treated in a day or for more complex patients to have longer face-to-face consultations.

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Step-by-step

1 When you've decided you want to use online consultations, you need to bring the rest of the team on board.

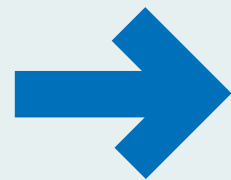


- Clinicians need to trust the process won't be unsafe.
- Receptionists need to both strongly promote the service and ensure appointments aren't booked unnecessarily.

4 Buy a license, for example using the new national fund created by the General Practice Forward View.



GENERAL PRACTICE FORWARD VIEW



2 Work out who will be processing the requests.



- A GP?
- A NURSE?
- ADMINISTRATIVE STAFF?
- RECEPTIONISTS?
- ONE OR TWO PEOPLE, OR A GROUP?



5 Promoting the new system

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LEAFLETS



PROMINENT POSITION ON WEBSITE



POSTERS



STAFF (RECEPTIONISTS TO GPs) TALK ABOUT THE PLATFORM



RECORDED MESSAGE ON THE PRACTICE TELEPHONE

3 If receptionists and/or administration staff, they may need to be trained.



DISCUSS WHAT WORKED AND WHAT DIDN'T



TRAINING