



Between appointments, digital communication enhances patient experience of care

Patients feel that the clinical team know them better.

"It's more personal. Because I have more contact now outside of clinic they know me a bit better and I know them a little better. It doesn't feel like I'm just 'another patient'."

Patient

Clinical teams gather more knowledge about the patient's condition.

"They asked me to email them my current blood pressure in order to monitor how healthy I am. So I take my blood pressure every two weeks and send it to them then."

Patient

Where there is an established relationship between a patient and health professional, test results can be given and medication adjusted through digital communication rather than the patient attending clinic. This saves the patient time and can be enabling.

"They used to say 'come in a week's time and we'll tell you the result'. Now with the text messages it's 'your blood levels are fine, you don't need to come in'."

Patient

"If there's anything wrong in-between I'll let her know and then she'll adjust this medication. It helps me to look after myself more because I know exactly what I'm doing... I'm constantly clued in."

Patient

Knowing someone is there and will answer a query is reassuring for patients.

"They say they like getting text messages because it reminds them that there's someone there for them and that someone is caring about them, even if they're not visibly being seen."

Nurse Practitioner

Knowing there will be a reply is the key to reassurance. Contact is equally valued if it is with an individual or a whole team or if the reply comes from a different member of the team than the one initially approached.

"If my usual nurse can't reply to me, someone else from the team will call back and try and give me the information that I want... it's been excellent."

Patient

Health professionals can use digital communication to maintain their relationship with a patient:

"If he messages and says, 'hi, how are you, blah, blah, blah', that will then remind me I was meant to text him a week ago and completely forgot."

Patient

Digital communication with patients can help catch problems early and act as encouraging reminders for patients to stick to treatment regimens.

"I'm absolutely convinced it's helped keep some people out of hospital, and in some cases I think it's actually stopped people dying. A couple of really poorly people - we've been able to communicate quickly and sort things really, really quickly."

Nurse Specialist

Some clinical teams enable patients to self-refer to therapists within the wider team via email.

"I get a lot of patients self-referring to me through email. I used to be uncomfortable with this. Now I just go with it because it feels so helpful."

Psychologist

Clinical care for people living with long term conditions - the role of digital communication between NHS clinical teams and their patients

Evidence based practice



These points for you to think about when using digital communication with patients come from a research study funded by the National Institute of Health Research.

We observed and interviewed nearly 200 members of specialist clinical teams from across the UK working with young people living with long term conditions.

We interviewed over 150 young people living with a range of conditions including diabetes, cancer, mental illness, liver disease, kidney disease, blood disorders, cystic fibrosis, inflammatory bowel disease and arthritis.

Young people and their clinical teams used text, mobile phone calls and emails to communicate about clinical issues. A few clinical teams engaged on social media sites with their patients.

The clinical teams were using digital communication to improve the engagement of the young people with their services. There is good evidence that improved engagement leads to improved health outcomes.

These young people and their clinical teams have worked out where and when it works well to communicate digitally about clinical matters such as symptoms, drug regimes and emotional distress. From their experience, they know what needs to be discussed and planned before using digital communication about clinical matters.

Their experience can be applied to working with other people with long term conditions who are accustomed to using digital communication (mobile phone, text, email), particularly if they have a smartphone, so access to this communication is straightforward.

If you are planning to communicate digitally with patients, talk about the points we raise with your team and with your organisation's Information, Governance, IT and Patient Safety Leads.

The study name is:

Improving health outcomes for young people with long term conditions: the role of digital communication in current and future patient-clinician communication for NHS providers of specialist clinical services; the LYNC study

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Further details about the study are available at:
www.nets.nihr.ac.uk/projects/hsdr/1220951

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Funding Acknowledgement: This project was funded by the National Institute for Health Research Health Services and Delivery Research (HS&DR) Programme (Project Number 12/209/51)
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