

Digital communication improves young patient engagement, according to new study

July 4 2017, by Nicola Jones

Using texts, emails, Skype and other digital communication methods can improve the health care experience of younger patients.

That is the conclusion of new research, led by the University of Warwick and King's College London, which examined case studies from 20 NHS specialist clinical teams from across England and Wales. A 'first look' scientific summary about the research has just been published on the NIHR Journals Library.

Young people with long-term health conditions often disengage from health services, resulting in poor health outcomes. In an attempt to address this, NHS clinicians are using [digital communication](#) to reverse this. However, so far it's been unclear whether this has been effective; there are gaps in evidence as to how it might work, its cost and ethical and safety issues.

The research, which was conducted between 2013-2016 was led by Professor Frances Griffiths from the Warwick Medical School and Jackie Sturt, Professor of Behavioural Medicine in Nursing at King's College London.

Professor Frances Griffiths said: "NHS policy prompts more widespread use of digital communication to improve health care experience. "Digital communication enables timely access for young people to the right clinician at the time when it can make a difference to how they manage their health condition. This is valued as an addition to traditional clinic

appointments, and can engage those otherwise disengaged. It can enhance patient autonomy, empowerment and activation."

Interviews were conducted with 165 young patients, aged 16-24 years, who live with a long-term health condition, along with 173 health professionals, including 16 information governance specialists. Overall, 79 clinical observations took place. The researchers wanted to establish if 16-24 year olds involved in their own health care improves as a result of using digital communication with their clinicians could improve, and to identify associated costs and necessary safeguards.

The findings suggest that benefit is most likely, and risks will be mitigated, when digital communication is used with patients who already have a relationship of trust with the clinical team, and who need to have flexible access, such as when transitioning between services, treatments or lived context. The study noted the implications for clinicians. The main cost driver is staff time. However, the researchers believe that this is likely to be offset by savings elsewhere in the health service. Young people and clinicians can mitigate risks of this approach by using common sense approaches to avoid increased dependence on clinicians, inadvertent disclosure of confidential information and communication failures. The researchers also noted that clinical teams need to be proactive in their approaches to ethics, governance and patient safety.

Professor Jackie Sturt commented, "Digital communication is already happening between [health](#) professionals and young people, and it's clearly something young people want. We think the NHS should be proactive in creating guidelines and helping clinicians to engage [young people](#) via digital [communication](#). There are obviously risks, but also the potential for real benefits."

More information: Timely Digital Patient-Clinician Communication in Specialist Clinical Services for Young People: A Mixed-Methods

Study (The LYNC Study). *Journal of Medical Internet Research*. [DOI: 10.2196/jmir.7154](https://doi.org/10.2196/jmir.7154)

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