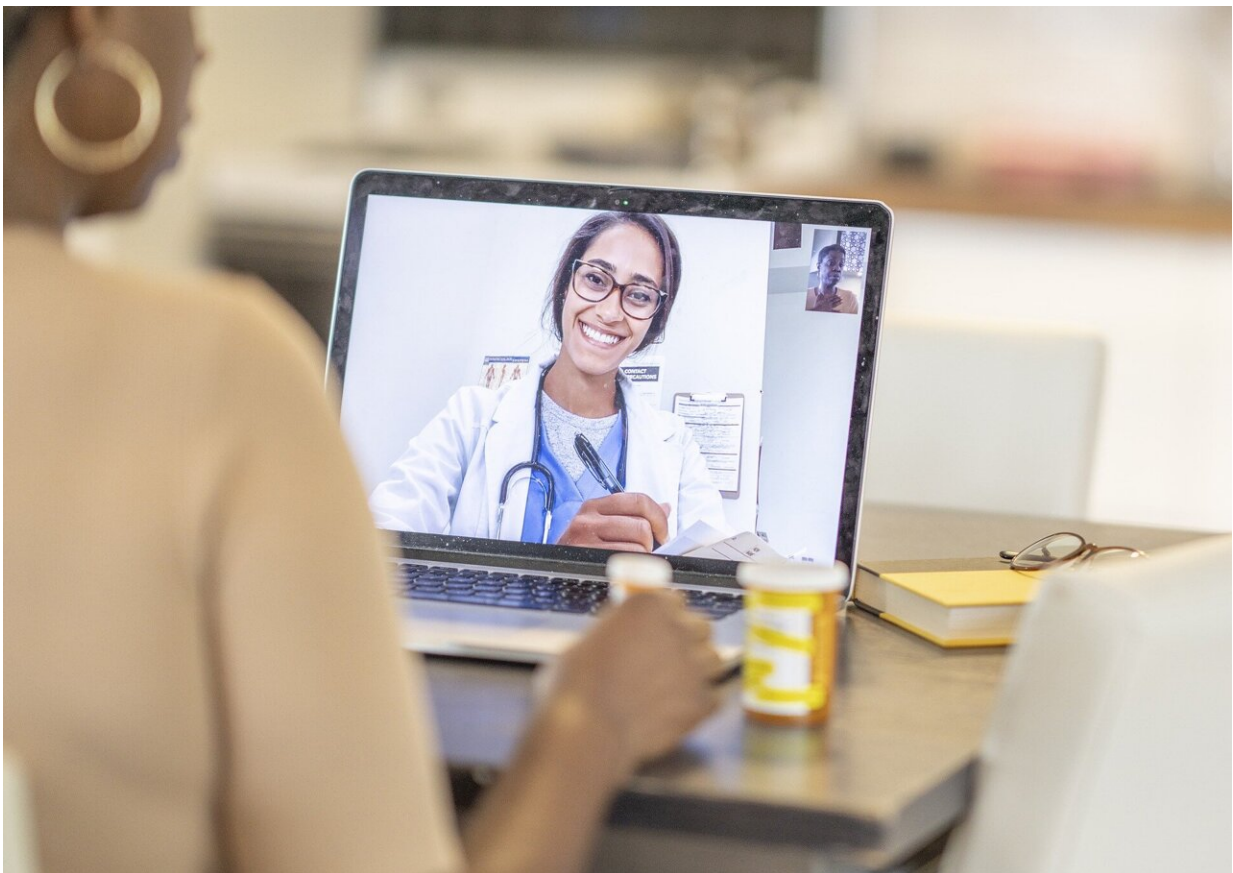


Online consultations can disadvantage some patients and create more work for GP practices

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Online GP consultations have unintended consequences that may put

some patients at a disadvantage and create additional work for GP practice staff, a National Institute for Health Research (NIHR)-funded study at the University of Bristol has shown. The DECODE study, published in the *British Journal of General Practice*, examined the use of online consultations in primary care to improve how they will be used in the future.

NHS England required all GP practices to offer [online consultations](#)—where [patients](#) submit their symptoms via an online form—by April 2020. Online consultations were promoted as a solution to improve [patient access](#) to primary care and reduce GP practice workload.

The researchers, based at the NIHR Applied Research Collaboration West (ARC West) and the Center for Academic Primary Care (CAPC), University of Bristol, interviewed 19 staff and 21 patients who used online [consultation](#) tools, across eight GP practices in the south west and north west. These interviews took place in 2019, before the COVID-19 pandemic.

They found that for some patients, online consultations improved access to care and were convenient. This was particularly the case for patients who felt they could express themselves better in writing. Some patients valued submitting enquiries online at a time that suited them and for simple enquiries that didn't warrant a face-to-face appointment.

However, online consultations made it difficult for some patients to communicate effectively with a GP. The structured questionnaires used in some systems were hard work for simple enquiries. When patients were allowed to write freely, some struggled to explain their issue. Patients weren't sure if they were writing to their own GP or someone else and had concerns of who would read their enquiry.

To ensure patients with limited IT access or skills could still access care,

some practices allowed staff to complete an online consultation form for them, over the phone or in person. However, this was time consuming for staff and could compromise patient confidentiality.

For some GPs, online consultations were valued for giving greater flexibility in managing patient care and staff working patterns. However, for others online consultations generated additional work and led to staff dissatisfaction. Poor quality or [incomplete information](#) meant patients needed to be followed up with a telephone or face-to-face consultation, which could duplicate work. Some GPs felt that spending more time in front of a computer processing enquiries resulted in 'call-center medicine' which was tiring and isolating, and meant less time physically seeing patients.

Dr. Andrew Turner from NIHR ARC West and the University's Center for Academic Primary Care, and a lead author of the study, said: "In many cases the unintended consequences we identified were often the result of how the online consultations were implemented, rather than just a consequence of the technologies themselves. This means some negative consequences can be avoided if they are recognized in advance and solutions are sufficiently resourced."

Professor Jeremy Horwood from NIHR ARC West and the University's Center for Academic Primary Care, added: "The roll-out of these systems has accelerated during the COVID-19 pandemic. Along with our previous work in this area, this research shows that it is critical to get the implementation of digital health technologies right. Primary care is already facing a workforce crisis and greater demand from patients. Technology should be helping rather than hindering access to care and GP workload."

The DECODE team have produced guidance outlining the unintended consequences they identified and their mitigation for clinicians and

practice managers.

"Unintended consequences of online consultations: a qualitative study in UK [primary care](#)" is published in the *British Journal of General Practice*

More information: Andrew Turner et al, Unintended consequences of online consultations: a qualitative study in UK primary care, *British Journal of General Practice* (2021). [DOI: 10.3399/BJGP.2021.0426](https://doi.org/10.3399/BJGP.2021.0426)

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