

E-consultation, a first step to true partnership with Primary Care

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Objective: Accessing specialist care will continue to be a major challenge. This long-term study addresses the steps to establish a novel e-consultation service (e-consults) to improve access to Specialist expertise and advice for primary care physicians (PCP).

Methods: E-consults were introduced in 2015. Proof of concept was established after the pilot phase (June 2015 to March 2016)¹. A second follow-up audit was done one year post-implementation (Sept 17-Jan 2018) focusing further on process and workflow, e-consultation templates, reduction in first face-to-face hospital visits, the rate of re-referrals, patient safety, PCP satisfaction and financial sustainability.

Results: 4738 referrals were made to the gynaecology service in the pilot phase (PP), and 1038 in the post-implementation phase (PIP). 1013 referrals (21.4%) were triaged for an e-consult in PP and 282 (27,1%) in PIP. The response time was less than 3 days and facilitated by the use of templates. Re-referral rate (14.5%) remained the same. The reduction in face-to-face contacts was 18.2% in the PP and 23.9% in the PIP group. No death and/or acute admission for the same reason as stated in the initial referral occurred among the patients with e-consultation and none were later diagnosed with an underlying (pre) malignancy. PCP satisfaction was high (> 90%). E-consultation was budget neutral; a decrease in revenue was compensated by an equal decrease in costs.

Conclusion: E-consultation does provide rapid access to specialist advice, is effective at reducing the number of first outpatient face-to-face contacts without notable compromise of the quality of care or patient safety and is highly appreciated by PCP's.

References:

1 Mann R., Van de Weijer PHM. Adopting innovation in gynaecology: the introduction of e-consult. ANZJOG 2018; 58:449-453.