



## ARC West

# DECODE: Exploring the unintended consequences of online consultations

2023



**Online consultation tools that allow patients to contact their GP have unintended consequences that put some patients at a disadvantage and create additional work for general practice staff.**

NHS England has required all GP practices to provide online consultations – where patients submit their symptoms via an online form – since April 2020.

The intention behind this change to how services were delivered was to improve patient access to care, increase its efficiency and reduce the workload of a GP practice.

### **What was the aim of the project?**

We wanted to understand the consequences of using online consultation tools in primary care, especially as some of them may have been unintended or unforeseen.

Understanding both the positive and negative impact of online consultations and ensuring that patients with limited IT access or skills are not disadvantaged is vital to improving how these services are used and provided in the future.

### **What did we do?**

In 2019, we interviewed 19 GP practice staff and 21 patients across 7 GP practices in the South West and North West, who had used online consultation tools.

## How did we involve people?

The project team included two members of the public who helped develop the analysis and interpret the findings.

We discussed findings with GPs, practice managers and policymakers, to distil them into guidance on avoiding unintended consequences.

## What did we learn?

Online consultations improved how some patients were able to access care. This was particularly the case for patients who felt they could express themselves better in writing. Some patients valued being able to submit enquiries at their own convenience.



Online consultations made it difficult for some patients to communicate effectively with a GP. Some struggled to explain their issue because they didn't know 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. However, this was time consuming for staff and could compromise confidentiality.

For some GPs, online consultations were valued for giving greater flexibility. For others they generated additional work or meant spending more time in front of a computer, which led to staff dissatisfaction.

## What next?

We have examined the implementation of remote consulting following the COVID-19 pandemic as part of the [RAPCI project](#).

We are now investigating the [impact of remote consultations on NHS clinicians](#).

## Read the paper by Turner et al. Unintended consequences of online consultations: a qualitative study in UK primary care

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<http://bit.ly/3YUtz7Q>

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At the NIHR Applied Research Collaboration (ARC) West, we conduct applied health research with our partners and others in the health and care sector, alongside patients and members of the public. Applied health research aims to address the immediate issues facing the health and social care system. We also help

bring research evidence into practice and provide training for the local workforce.

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