

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

Key messages

- ❖ **Digital access to the right clinical team at a time when it makes a difference to how patients manage their health condition is valued as an addition to traditional clinic appointments.** It is most valued when patients are in transition – changing treatments, deteriorating in condition, moving between child and adult services, changing their life circumstances. It works well where there is an existing, trusting relationship between clinical team and patient. An agreement on the content, channel of communication, and boundaries of access appears to be important.
- ❖ **Messages sent via mobile phone, email or internet (asynchronous communication) allows users to attend to the message when they choose.** Short messaging is good for test results, follow up of specific issues and prompting contact for further discussion. Email is good for guidance on how to use a treatment, description of symptoms and patient worries. Asynchronous communication is appreciated by patients and clinicians for allowing thinking time between communications.
- ❖ **Audio (with or without visual) digital communication is good for urgent problems and where discussion is needed.** As it is more like traditional consulting health professionals find this easier and, apart from urgent calls, it can be scheduled just like traditional clinics. Patients need to find a private space for holding conversations.
- ❖ **International research evidence** indicates that digital communication between health providers and patients improves health outcomes when it overcomes physical barriers to access such as distance, and when used to prompt behaviour change (e.g. medication adherence and therapy in mental health).

What is needed?

Innovating health professionals are working out how their professional knowledge, norms and values can be operationalised for digital practice and are adjusting their working practices. **Availability of training is likely to accelerate the spread of this adaptation.**

Innovating patients are working out how to use digital access to their healthcare team to help them manage their health condition whilst avoiding disruption to their daily lives. **Patients have valuable insights for service development.**

Research evidence is needed on whether access to timely digital communication enables and strengthens the management of long-term conditions and improves both clinical and psychological outcomes related to their conditions (e.g. condition-related distress).

This policy brief is based on the results of 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.

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:

<https://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/med/research/hscience/sssh/research/lynics/>

Available on the website:

- Based on our study findings the [Quick Reference e-book](#) with 10 [Topic Guides](#) are for patients and professionals who are using or considering the use of digital communication on clinical matters. The e-book and Topic Guides are free to download.
- Dramatised stories of [Sophie](#), 17yrs with type 1 diabetes and [Abdul](#), 21yrs with depression, as they manage their long term conditions independently. Co-developed from study findings with Face Front Inclusive Theatre Company.
- Details of professional development course on [Digital Communication for Health](#) developed from study findings.



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