

# FOCUS ON RESEARCH

## NON FACE TO FACE CONSULTATIONS AND COMMUNICATIONS IN GENERAL PRACTICE: THE ROLE AND PERSPECTIVE OF PRACTICE MANAGERS

### Researchers

Dr Karen Fairhurst, Dr Lisa Hanna, Prof Carl May

### Aim

(i) To explore practice managers' experiences of, and attitudes to, non face to face consultation/communication technologies in primary care (ii) to explore the practice manager's role in the introduction and normalisation of non face to face consultation/communication technologies in general practice.

### Project Outline/Methodology

Secondary analysis of survey data, collected during a previous project, from 600 practice managers across Scotland on their experiences of, and attitudes towards, non face to face consultation/communication technologies.

20 qualitative interviews were carried out with previous survey respondents, representing a range of practice and professional characteristics, to explore in-depth their attitudes to these technologies and the factors influencing their introduction into general practice.

### Key Results

Practice managers were most willing to consider using the telephone to communicate or consult with patients (96.8%), followed by email (71.5%), teleconsulting (33.3%) and text messaging (32.5%). Many would support the use of new technologies for routine tasks to manage workload and maximise convenience for patients, but a range of contextual factors affected whether managers would pursue the introduction of these technologies in the immediate future. The most common objections were medicolegal concerns and perceived patient demand. Managers from more deprived and from smaller practices were significantly more likely to perceive a lack of patient demand for email. In more deprived areas, managers were more concerned that email communications might lead to inequality of access for patients. Managers based in more remote and rural locations, and in smaller practices, were more likely to consider use of new technologies unnecessary for their practice population. Older managers viewed text messaging less positively than younger respondents.

### Conclusions

Practice managers appear to play a central role to the introduction of new consultation/communication technologies within general practice. They hold varying views on the appropriateness of these technologies, influenced by a complex mix of contextual characteristics. Managers from areas in which the ethos of the practice prioritises personalised care in service delivery are less enthusiastic about the adoption of remote consultation/communication technologies.

### What does this study add to the field?

No previous research has examined the central role of general practice managers in the introduction, implementation and normalisation of new modes of consulting or communicating with patients. This study provides comprehensive national data on practice managers' experiences and attitudes and has collected rich qualitative data exploring their perspective and the process through which new technologies are introduced into general practice.

### Implications for Practice or Policy

Practice managers are likely to play a key role in any proposed service re-design to introduce non face to face consultation/communication technologies in primary care. They should be consulted prior to and during the introduction of any new technologies, and clear medico-legal and IT support available to support the implementation of new systems of patient contact.

### Where to next?

Research into patients' attitudes towards new information and communication technologies in primary care is vital to provide an evidence base for public willingness to use such services and address primary care professionals' central concerns about patient demand for new modes of consultation/communication in general practice.

### Further details from:

Dr Karen Fairhurst  
General Practice Section  
University of Edinburgh  
Karen.Fairhurst@ed.ac.uk

