Current experience and future potential of facilitating access to digital NHS primary care services in England: the Di-Facto mixed-methods study

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Plain language summary

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Background

Online services are common in the National Health Service. This research looked at 'digital facilitation' in general practices. Digital facilitation is about supporting National Health Service patients in their use of online services. We aimed to understand how much digital facilitation is being used by general practices. We also looked at how digital facilitation happens and if it affects the number of people using online services.

Methods

1. We looked at previous research to help us understand what approaches have been used to support patients to use online services.
2. We used surveys to ask staff at general practices what they were already doing, and to ask patients about their experiences.
3. We observed digital facilitation in general practices and spoke to patients and staff to help us understand the benefits and challenges of different approaches.
4. We combined findings from the three stages outlined above to identify key aspects of digital facilitation.

All stages of our research included discussions with the project's patient advisory group.

Key findings

We found that digital facilitation is seen as important and has many forms. Most general practices are using passive and reactive types of facilitation. An example of passive facilitation, initiated by the service but not involving direct inter-personal interaction, is the use of text messaging relating to ordering of repeat prescriptions online. An example of reactive facilitation is providing a response to a patient-initiated query regarding online access. There is clear scope to develop a more proactive approach to facilitation that actively engages patients. Our research highlights a lack of clarity over who is responsible for digital facilitation. Different people (patients, staff, policy-makers) often think that the responsibility lies with others. Investment in digital facilitation is needed. Tools and platforms for digital facilitation that meet patients' and general practices' needs should be developed.

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