LETTERS

THE PRIVATE, ONLINE GP WILL SEE YOU NOW

Need for evidence on telehealth providers

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Timely access to a GP is sometimes difficult to obtain, particularly for acute problems, and recruitment and retention problems within general practice clearly need to be addressed to overcome this deficit.¹

Online providers are limited by what they can offer in a virtual environment, and there is no concrete evidence that they will help the NHS generate efficiency gains by reducing GPs' workloads. In addition, the clinical performance of this sector is not well understood. Sixty telehealth firms currently operate in the UK market, and in its 2014-15 state of healthcare and adult social care in England report, the Care Quality Commission's view on mobile doctors was that, "not all of these [have been] rated. However, our inspections to date suggest these services are performing well" (table 1).² We also do not know the extent to which this model of healthcare might distort equity if patients who cannot access their GP are then discouraged from attending an emergency department and elect to pay out-of-pocket. General practices in England receive an average of £136 annually per patient for an unlimited number of visits. Dr Morton's, for example, charges £60 for one telephone consultation.

We anticipate that this sector will expand because of the considerable support from central government to expand the digital health sector and because patients are thought to feel more empowered by decision support tools and being able to access a doctor at a convenient time for them. Given the pressures facing GPs it is important to examine new avenues of care delivery. Telehealth remains an emerging field in the UK, and policy makers will need more robust evidence of clinical quality and efficiency savings without exacerbation of health inequalities before the model is wholeheartedly embraced.

Competing interests: None declared.

- 1 Torjesen I. The private, online GP will see you now. *BMJ* 2016;352:i823. doi:10.1136/bmj.i823. 26873876.
- 2 Care Quality Commission. Health and adult social care in England: 2014 to 2015. 2015. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/health-and-adult-social-care-in-england-2014-to-2015>

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Table

Table 1 | A selection of online GP providers operating in the UK

Company	Services offered	Cost/consultation (£)	Duration (mins)	CQC rating
Push Doctor	Online consultation, prescription, referral letter/fit to work	25	10	Not inspected
Dr Morton's	Telephone and email consultations, prescription	60 (telephone), 25 (email)	<5 minutes	Not inspected
Lloyd's Pharmacy Online Doctor	Telephone/skype consultation, home testing, prescription	Not listed	Not listed	Met standards in all domains (2012)
Talk to a Doctor	Telephone consultation	30	20 minutes	Not listed
	Online (webcam, VoIP, instant messaging)	1 minute	3 exchanges	
Doctor Matt	Prescription	Not listed	Not listed	Met standards (2014)
Pharmacy 2U	Online consultation, prescription	15	Not listed	Met standards (2014)
E-Med	Email/skype consultation, prescription	15 (+ 20 membership fee)	Not listed	Met standards (2013)
Doctor Fox	Telephone/email consultation, prescription	Value of prescription item	Not listed	Met standards (2013)
Babylon Health	VoIP consultation, home testing	29 (one-off), 79 (specialist appointment), 4.99/month	Not listed	Not inspected