

GENERAL PRACTITIONERS AND ONLINE CONSULTATION

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Internet and online services are part of everyday life. We perceive as normal their use in various activities. It's normal for healthcare and medicine to use them.

Aim: To investigate e-mail use for online consultation by GPs.

Materials and methods: Written questionnaire.

Results: Physicians don't have business e-mail and don't use their personal one for online consultation. Desire for this type of consultation is low, telephone consultation is preferred.

Conclusion: Online consultation is a promising method which is not used in Bulgaria. Significant part of the physicians would use it if compensated properly.

Key words: *General practitioner, online consultation*

Introduction: In modern society, Internet and high technologies have become part of everyday life. Online services are perceived as something simple, their use for trade, communication, decision making, administrative and legal activities is completely normal. The great opportunities, wider range of activities and conveniences which online services provide are not limited to daily and household use, medicine as a science and healthcare systems can also to use them.

Email consultation has the potential to become "routine" procedure because of its effectiveness, efficiency and low cost. A potential for abuse and violations for this type of written communication also exists with clinical and ethical implications [4].

Studies show that change and the introduction of such consultation should be gradual rather than promptly. [20]

Literature review of the situation in the world shows that e-mail consultation is not widely used [6], despite its recognition and potential. [7]. Several groups demonstrated the use of email consultation in various medical specialties. [8] [9] [13] [14] [15] [21] Several studies were made on the motivation of people to use online consultation [3] [10] [11] [12] and its potential to meet the growing needs for consultation. [19] [16] [17]. Partial usage of the online consultation are showed by a number of other authors. [1] [2] [5] [18]

Aims and tasks: To investigate Internet use by GPs, to see what portion of GPs have email, do they have a professional one and whether they use it for online consultation. Also the availability of subscriptions among them for online sites in their area of expertise.

Materials and methods: The use questionnaire contains ten closed questions. The questionnaires were distributed personally to GPs selected by random mechanism. After filling in the answers a chance for comment was given if desired.

Results: The survey involved 30 general practitioners in the country, selected at random mechanism. Of these, 10 were men and 20 women. The group included doctors with practices in university towns, municipal and regional cities, small towns and villages. The average work experience is over 10 years. The average age is 45 years. Average size of the practice is about 1500 people. A small group of 6 doctors were specializing at the moment.

Gender	Male	10 (33.3%)
	Female	20 (66.6%)
Age	<25 y.o.	0(0%)
	25-35 y.o.	3(10%)
	35-45 y.o.	10(33.3%)
	45-55 y.o.	11(36.6%)
	>55 y.o.	6(20%)
Workplace	University city	2(6.6%)
	Municipal city	3(10%)
	Regional city	3(10%)
	Town	9(30%)
	Village	13(43.3%)
Work experience	<5 y.	1(3.3%)
	5-10 y.	2(6.6%)
	10-20 y.	12(40%)
	20-30 y.	10(33.3%)
	>30 y.	5(16.6%)
Speciality	Doing residency	6(20.0%)
	GP	20(66.6%)
	Other speciality	4(13.3%)
Size of practice	<1000 people	4(13.3%)
	1000-1500 people	11(36.3%)
	1500-2000 people	11(36.3%)
	>2000 people	4(13.3%)

All of the questioned GPs have an e-mail, regardless of internet access at their workplace, while only 5 people have 2 or more emails. Four of the participants have subscription to a site with professional information (13.3%), and willingness to participate in this type of consultation is just over half 16 (53.3%) and only if appropriately reimbursed.

Do you have a email?	Yes	30(100%)
	No	0(0%)
If yes, how many?	1	25(83.3%)
	2	4(13.3%)
	>2	1(3.3%)
Do you have a subscription to a site with professional database in your speciality	Yes	4(13.3%)
	No	26(86.6%)
Would you participate in online consultation	Yes	16(53.3%)
	No	14(46.6%)

The distribution by gender did not give clear connection to the other indicators. There is a clear correlation between age and location of practice, young people (under 35 years old) prefer cities, possibly municipal or district, while older GPs are distributed mostly in small towns and villages. The second clear dependence between the size of practices and their location: practices located in villages and small towns are usually with more than 1500 people, while those in big cities are mostly under 1500. The third connection that emerges is between age and the availability of speciality: the number of specialists in general medicine among general practitioners under 35 years of age is higher than that in over 35 years of age. Although all doctors say that they have e-mail, only those under 35 have more than one, they are also the one's with subscriptions to an online database in general medicine. There is a similar correlation between the desire for online counseling and age, younger GPs are willing to use it if appropriately reimbursed, while older GPs show no such motivation.

In conclusion we can say that young GPs prefer larger cities, have smaller practices, have a speciality, have more than one e-mail and willing to use online consultation. In contrast, older GPs are mostly in villages and small towns have large practices, have one e-mail and are reluctant to apply online consultation.

After completing the questionnaire the participants were given a chance to comment. The majority noted that although not conducting online consultation they held significant number of telephone consultations and over 50% of them under appropriate conditions and pay would participate in this type of consultation.

Conclusion: Online consultation is a promising method that could significantly reduce the workload of GPs and facilitate patients. In Bulgaria there are conditions for its application, but the lack of popularity and a mechanism for paying physicians, for the work performed is the cause of low utilization, despite its advantages.

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