
POSTER ABSTRACT

Implementation of an asynchronous general practitioner-to-specialist eConsult service (eConsultant) in Australia

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Background: With the rise in demand for specialist care across Australia, patients are experiencing excessive delays for specialist input, linked with subsequent deterioration in health. eConsultant is an outpatient substitution model which has been evaluated and implemented extensively internationally. It provides an asynchronous, digital, clinician-to-clinician advice service, giving GPs remote access to specialist support for patient care within 3-business days. This study, the first to track implementation of an eConsultant service in Australia, identifies barriers and enablers to adoption prior to broader implementation.

Method: Our prospective mixed-methods observational study included semi-structured interviews with GPs and stakeholders to understand determinants of implementation. GPs send a Request-for-Advice (RFA) to the specialist and advise patients to schedule a timely follow-up appointment to discuss the eConsultant advice. Adoption (program enrolment/usage by GPs & GP practices) was assessed.

Results: The study is underway in 12 rural/remote and 10 urban general practices. To date, RFAs have been generated for 178 patients (mean age 59.5yrs, 63% rural, 37% urban). The GPs mean time to response by the eConsultant was 1.7 (SD 2.3) days and patients mean time to specialist input (initial GP to GP follow-up appointment) was 13.0 (SD 2.7) days (well below average waiting times for OPD appointments). Qualitative interviews conducted with 11 GPs and 4 stakeholders highlight the benefits of eConsultant to providing efficient/timely access to specialist support for GPs and their patients.

Conclusion: eConsultant is feasible in Australia with benefits to the health system of timely specialist support for patients without the cost of subsidised patient travel, face-to-face visits, and potentially preventable hospital admissions. eConsultant provides GPs with a reliable, auditable record of advice given by specialists, an opportunity for GP practice capacity building and more direct partnership with specialist colleagues. eConsultant offers a streamlined evidence-based option, implementable state-wide, to support patients and primary care providers.