

# Understanding patient access to online GP services

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## Summary

The shift to digital GP services provides important opportunities for people to take greater control over their health and care and to reduce administrative burdens on GP practices.

As a frontline service, we see daily in our work the rapid changes in the ways people want to access services. Digital technologies are transforming the way we engage with and support our clients. We are therefore interested to understand whether public services face similar challenges and opportunities as they adapt to meet shifting preferences.

Our brief analysis of the GP Patient Survey reveals several insights:

- Despite the fact just over a third (34 per cent) of patients would like to book online appointments, only 6 per cent of patients normally do so despite drives to promote online access.
- This is in part explained by low patient awareness of online GP services - fewer than three in ten patients (27 per cent) said they were aware of being able to book appointments online. But the functionality of online GP services might also be a barrier. Users have encountered technical difficulties and can find the requirement to attend the GP practice to

collect online login details problematic. Meanwhile, new paid-for services are starting to offer new ways to access a GP online or via a mobile device.

- By encouraging and supporting online access, GP practices can improve the patient experience. Patients who were aware of online services and use online services were more likely to rate their overall GP surgery experience as 'very good'. For instance, half of patients (50 per cent) who order repeat prescriptions online rate their surgery as 'very good'. In contrast, only 41 per cent of patients, who said they cannot access online services, described their experience as 'very good'.

## Research methodology

This briefing analyses data from the GP Patient Survey collected over the past five years, with a primary focus on the most recent data published in July 2015.

The GP Patient Survey is a quantitative survey in which questionnaires are sent by post to approximately 2.6 million people across England (split across two waves). In 2014/15, just over 858,381 questionnaires were returned, giving a response rate of 32.5 per cent.<sup>1</sup> Response rates have been similar over the past five years.<sup>2</sup>

The survey, run by Ipsos MORI on behalf of NHS England, asks patients to feedback their experiences of the service provided by their GP surgery as well as their preferences for different approaches. The results are validated as Official Statistics.

## Findings

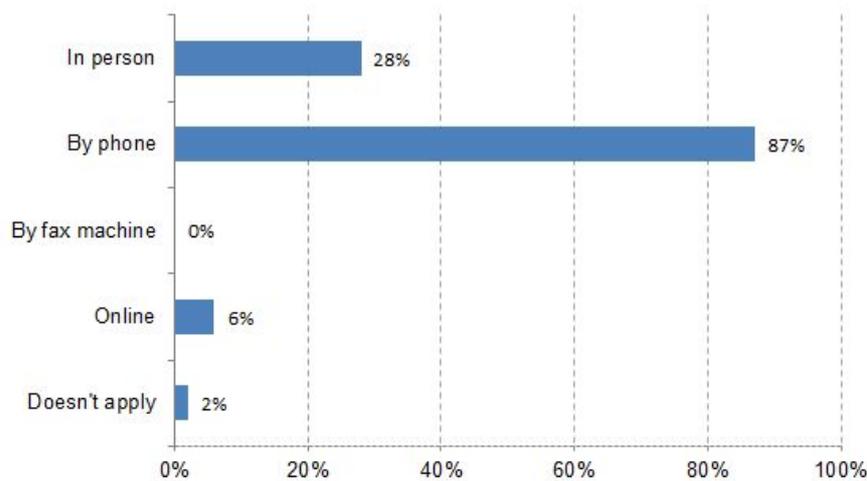
Despite the drive to increase access to online GP services and a growing number of patients preferring digital, the large majority (87 per cent) still book GP appointments over the phone and nearly three in ten patients (28 per cent) said they book appointments in person. As Figure 1 shows, only six per cent of patients said they normally book their appointment online.

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<sup>1</sup> Ipsos MORI (2015) GP Patient Survey - National Summary Report  
<http://gp-survey-production.s3.amazonaws.com/archive/2015/July/July%202015%20National%20Summary%20Report.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> The response rate for the survey findings published in July 2014 was 34%; in June 2013 it was 35% and in June 2012 it was 38%.

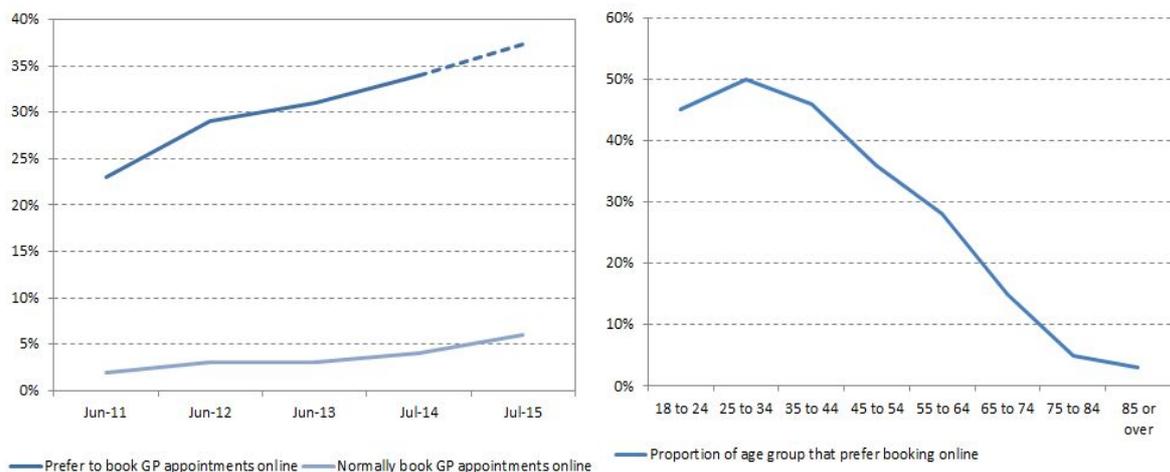
**Figure 1: Patients according to normal booking method to see a GP or nurse (multiple choices possible)**



Source: Citizens Advice analysis of the GP Patient Survey Ipsos MORI for NHS England July 2015

Patient behaviour contrasts with patient preferences. Findings published in July 2014 reveal that just over a third of people (34 per cent) would like to book their GP appointment online and this figure is likely higher today. Figure 2 reveals the gap between patient preferences and patient behaviour. The chart on the right, plotting patient preferences according to age, highlights why it is likely a growing number of patients will prefer online booking methods.

**Figure 2: Patient preferences for online GP appointment booking compared with normal booking methods; patient preference for online appointment booking according to age group**



Source: Citizens Advice analysis of the GP Patient Survey Ipsos MORI for NHS England June 2011 - July 2015; Citizens Advice analysis of GP Patient Survey Ipsos MORI for NHS England July 2014

We see similar patterns when it comes to online prescriptions. Whilst patients were slightly more likely to order repeat prescriptions online, with 10 per cent saying they do this, the large majority (86 per cent) of patients said they do not use any online services.

### **So what explains low engagement with online GP services?**

The gap between patient preferences and patient behaviour would, of course, make sense if online GP services were unavailable. But official data suggests that this is not the case. In June 2014, prior to data collection, 83 per cent of GP practices offered online appointment booking and this had increased to 89 per cent by the time the second wave of data collection occurred.<sup>3</sup> As of March 2015, all GP practices are required to offer online appointment bookings, repeat prescriptions and access to summary information held in patients' records.<sup>4</sup>

So what explains low patient usage of online services? We believe two factors could be at play:

- patient awareness of online GP services
- the functionality of online GP services

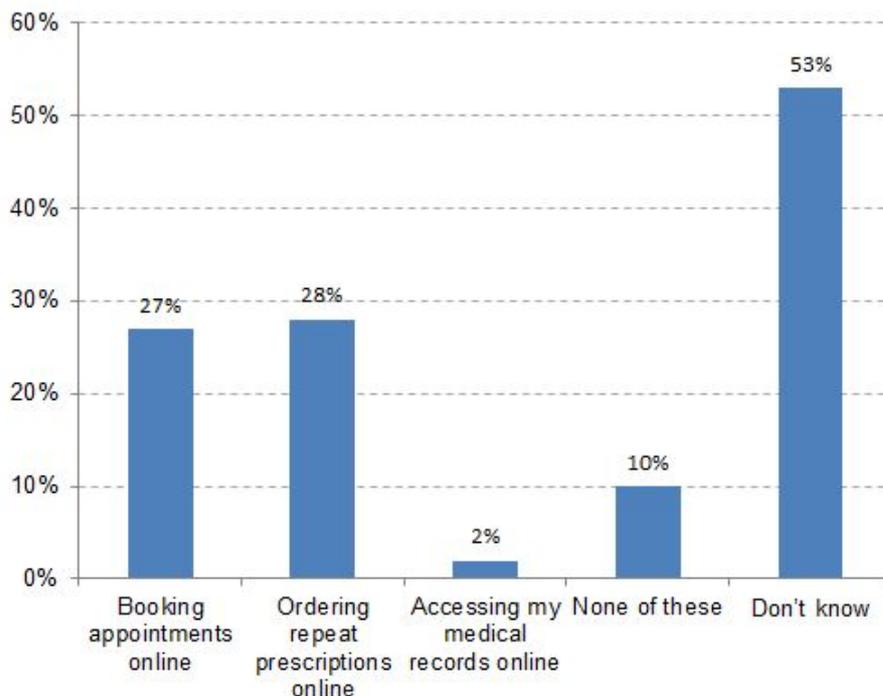
Low awareness may to some extent explain low usage. As Figure 3 shows, fewer than three in ten patients (27 per cent) said they were aware of being able to book appointments online whilst 28 per cent said they were aware of being able to order repeat prescriptions online. Over half of patients (53 per cent) said they don't know which services are available online, whilst 10 per cent of patients said no online services were available at their GP practice. For many GP practices, it's still early days for their online services, but these findings suggest there is scope to increase awareness of their offer to patients.

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<sup>3</sup> HSCIC (2014) Indicator portal - Whether GP Practices Provide Functionality For Patients To Book Or Cancel Appointments Electronically

<sup>4</sup> Contractual obligations, as outlined in the Patient Online programme, mean that from March 2015 all GP practices are required to offer online appointment booking, online repeat prescriptions and online access to medical records. More information available here: <http://www.england.nhs.uk/ourwork/pe/patient-online/>

**Figure 3: Patient awareness of online GP services (multiple choices possible)**

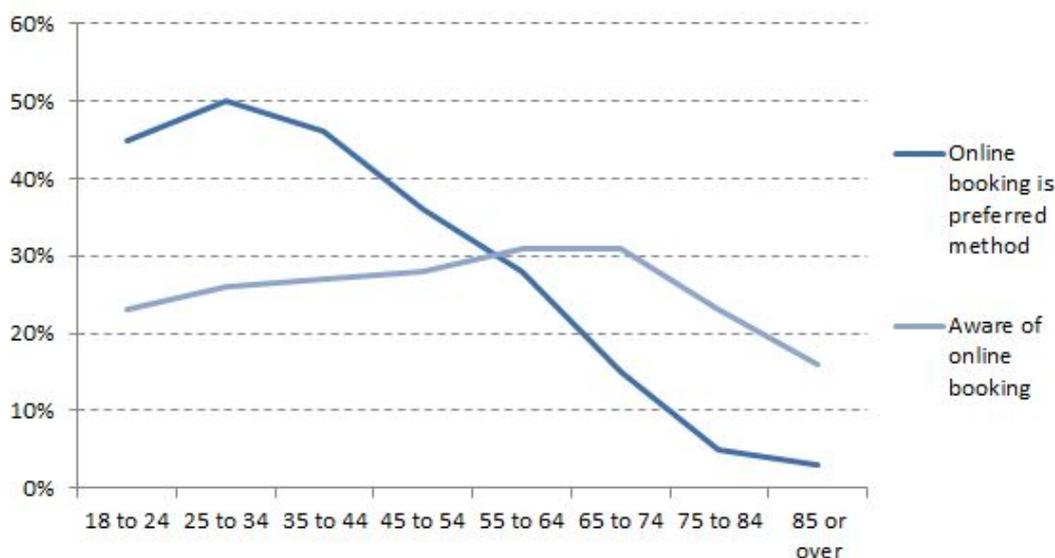


Source: Citizens Advice analysis of the GP Patient Survey Ipsos MORI for NHS England July 2015

Furthermore, preference for online services does not appear to correlate with awareness of online services. Our previous research<sup>5</sup> has highlighted the importance of online services - especially to younger people. But despite the fact that around half (45 per cent) of patients aged 18 - 24 prefer online appointment booking, only 23 per cent said they were aware of their GP practice offering this option. The majority (59 per cent) of 18 - 24 year olds said they didn't know what was available. The findings are similar for those aged 25 - 34, where 50 per cent said they prefer online booking, but only 26 per cent were aware of their GP service providing this option. Over half (54 per cent) said they didn't know. Figure 4 highlights how awareness and preferences vary over age; the people who are most likely to prefer online booking are the least likely to be aware that this service is available.

<sup>5</sup> Kaper, C. and Plunkett, J. (2014) *Evolving expectations of GP Services*, Citizens Advice

**Figure 4: Preference for online booking and awareness of online booking split by age**



Source: Citizens Advice analysis of the GP Patient Survey Ipsos MORI for NHS England July 2014 - July 2015

The functionality of online GP services can also offer insight into low patient usage. For instance, some GP services require that a patient attends the practice in person with identification documents in order to obtain the necessary login details for online services.<sup>6</sup> We know from our previous research that attending a GP practice in person can be difficult for people who, for instance, have work commitments or caring duties.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, patients have reported technical problems, such as the online patient portal failing to recognise that they are a registered patient.

This is a story of significant variation and there are examples of excellent practice. Recent research by the Royal College of GPs shows how getting the online offer right can offer a number of benefits.<sup>8</sup> The Robin Lane Medical Centre, for instance, has set up a smartphone app which allows patients to book appointments, send secure messages to clinicians and create appointment reminders. The app has enabled the GP surgery to engage with harder to reach patient groups, such as younger people seeking sexual health advice, and around 700 patients currently use the app.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>6</sup>NHS Choices (2015) GP online services  
<http://www.nhs.uk/aboutNHSChoices/aboutnhschoices/find-and-choose-services/Pages/gp-online-booking-systems.aspx>

<sup>7</sup> Greenhalgh, L, Mercer, S. and Plunkett, J. (2015) *Registering frustration*, Citizens Advice

<sup>8</sup> Ware, J. and Mawby, R. (2015) Patient access to general practice: ideas and challenges from the front line, Royal College of General Practitioners

<sup>9</sup> *ibid*

Other GP practices have taken advantage of the free tool, Skype. For instance, the South King Street Medical Practice in Blackpool offers Skype consultations. The service has proved particularly popular with housebound older people, serving as an alternative to a home visit. Clinicians are also very positive about the Skype service and hope that it will reduce demands on their time.<sup>10</sup>

Furthermore, GP practices are not the only organisations taking advantage of new technologies. A number of start-ups are also seeking to exploit the potential opportunities. Companies, such as *Babylon* and *Dr Now*, offer video consultations and issue prescriptions and medicines within hours. *Babylon* now has over 100,000 patients which demonstrates the demand for accessible online healthcare.<sup>11</sup> Patient preferences suggest that demand for these paid-for services could grow further if they continue to have an edge when it comes to ease of access online.

### **Usage of online GP services correlate with higher levels of patient satisfaction**

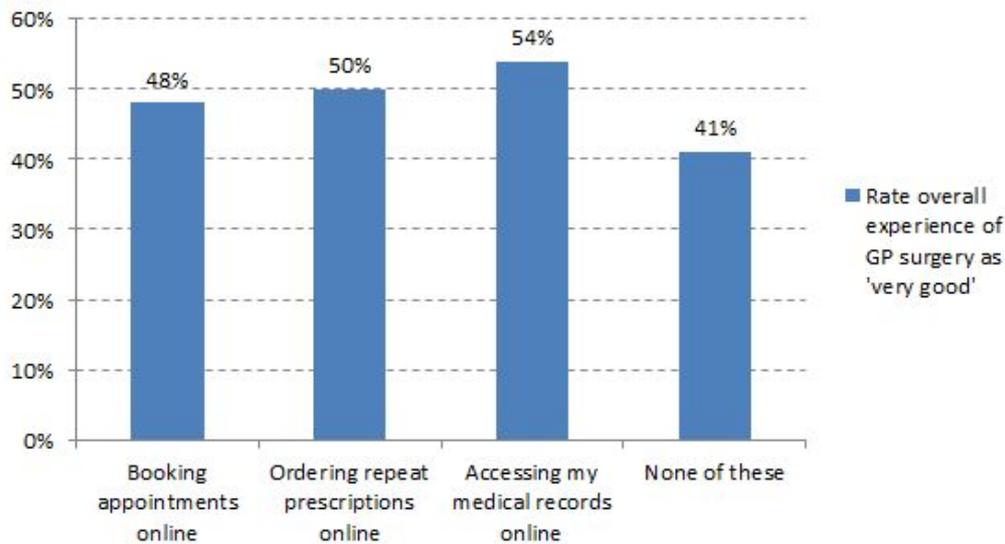
Finally, we have explored the benefits for wider patient satisfaction that are associated with online access. The data suggests clear incentives for GP services to improve marketing of their online offer to patients. Patient awareness and usage of GP services correlate with higher levels of overall satisfaction with their GP surgery. As Figure 5 shows, patients who use online GP services are more likely to report a 'very good' experience compared with those patients who have no access to online services.

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<sup>10</sup> Ware, J. and Mawby, R. (2015) Patient access to general practice: ideas and challenges from the front line, Royal College of General Practitioners

<sup>11</sup> Kollwe, J. (2015) Dr Now: the smartphone app that puts you in touch with a GP – for a fee [http://www.theguardian.com/business/2015/aug/02/dr-now-smartphone-app-contact-gp-fee?CMP=Share\\_iOSApp\\_Other](http://www.theguardian.com/business/2015/aug/02/dr-now-smartphone-app-contact-gp-fee?CMP=Share_iOSApp_Other)

**Figure 5: Usage of online services; overall experience of GP surgery as 'very good'**



Source: Citizens Advice analysis of the GP Patient Survey Ipsos MORI for NHS England July 2015

## Comment

The shift to online GP services will, of course, not be appropriate for everyone. But by encouraging awareness and usage, GP practices can improve patient satisfaction whilst also freeing up time to help those who cannot access digital services. The Patient Online initiative, implemented in March 2015, now means that all GP practices offer online services including appointment booking, repeat prescriptions and access to medical records. GP practices should proactively promote these services.

As patient preferences for digital grows over time, and demand continues to increase, technology provides a key way of balancing patient expectations alongside demand management imperatives.