

Impact of and satisfaction with a new eConsult service: a qualitative study of primary care providers

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Background

- Excessive wait times for specialist appointments remain a significant barrier to care in Canada.
- The Champlain BASE* service is a secure, web-based tool that allows primary care providers (PCPs) quick access to specialist care for their patients.
- Over 40% of cases processed through the system led to an unnecessary specialist referral being avoided.
- PCPs are required to answer a brief survey upon closing each eConsult case.

Research Question

- What are the perspectives of PCPs who use the Champlain BASE eConsult service?

Methods

- Open-text responses from the close-out survey were used to evaluate PCPs' perspectives on the eConsult service.
- The data were analyzed using content analysis with an emergent code strategy.
- Coding was done by two members of the research team who met regularly to compare codes and used an iterative process to refine the codes. The researchers were consulted regularly to obtain consensus on the codes and to resolve any conflicts.
- From the available quantitative data, mean satisfaction scores were assessed to supplement the qualitative analysis.

Major Themes

- We analyzed 2052 eConsults completed during the study period. In 554 cases a PCP elected to include a written response.
- PCPs reported a mean satisfaction rating for the patients as 4.60 out of 5 (95% CI: 4.57 to 4.63) and for themselves as 4.66 out of 5 (95% CI: 4.63 to 4.69).
- Through the analysis of the written comments from PCPs we identified three overarching themes: PCP appreciation of the eConsult service, perceived benefits to the quality of patient care, and attitudes towards using a new health technology.

1) PCP appreciation of the eConsult service

- PCPs spoke frequently about how much they appreciated the timely feedback, thorough responses, and reassuring nature of receiving a quick answer when encountering a complex case.

Fantastic to be able to get great advice within hours of sending the consult. This is so helpful for me in my rural practice.

Very thorough reply! I have a lot of patients that come back with this result [...] now I have a clear course of action when I get similar results in the future!

2) Perceived benefits for the quality of patient care

- PCPs often reported that having their questions answered more quickly rather than waiting to see a specialist put their patients at ease, while avoided referrals reduced the burden of delays and travel.

A referral is still needed, but we are not worried about long delay for getting referral, now that we know it is not serious.

This likely saved my patient an extra trip to Ottawa, and paying for a driver.

3) Attitudes towards using a new health technology

- PCPs noted the eConsult service's ease of use and their appreciation for its ability to upload relevant laboratory tests, pictures, or videos. Some PCPs made requests for additional specialties or added functionality within the system, and a small number experienced technical challenges.

A great resource. The ability to send a video was incredibly helpful.

Upload of photos worked well. response was very quick and the reply was specific.

Really pleased with process but had trouble with not getting email confirming that specialist had responded.

Participant Characteristics

Table 1. Characteristics of PCPs and patients for those eConsults where the PCP elected to leave a written response.

Characteristic	Number
PCPs (n=137)	
Female %, (No.)	73.7 (101)
MD %, (No.)	78.1 (107)
Patients (n=554)	
Age (range)	49.8 (32.0-62.7)
Female % (No.)	63.7 (353)

What We Learned

- When discussing eConsult, PCPs frequently referred to their appreciation for the service, the benefits they saw it offer to patients, and their attitudes towards adopting new health technology.
- PCPs were highly satisfied with the Champlain BASE eConsult service, citing quick turnaround times, quality responses, and educational value as key benefits.
- The few negative comments found were from the initial stages of the service, and focussed primarily on the lack of specialty services (no longer an issue) and technological challenges (an issue that needs continuous monitoring).
- Further work needs to be done to regularly analyse PCPs' feedback to ensure the service continues to meet their needs. Consideration will be given to exploring PCP perspectives through interviews or focus groups.