

# Friendly GP just a click away

As online diagnosis and prescription services expand, will virtual consultations become a reality?

**T**he rise of the internet as a self-diagnosis tool has been well documented, but now the web is emerging as a platform for properly regulated diagnosis and treatment.

Lloyds pharmacy's Online Doctor, for instance, offers a virtual consultation with a GP and private prescriptions dispensed by post for conditions ranging from impotence to hair loss.

And now the service is rolling out to bricks-and-mortar pharmacies, allowing customers to log on, obtain a prescription and collect their treatment within a few minutes, without the need to see a GP face to face.

Lloyds pharmacy's partner in this venture is online health specialist Dr Thom, whose own sexual health specialist service is regulated by the Care Quality Commission.

So the space once dominated by cowboys is being colonised by reputable healthcare brands that are following robust clinical protocols and submitting to independent regulation.

In a few years, we may look back at these first steps towards online healthcare with whimsical fondness, remarking how, these days, few of us wait to see GPs in their surgery. We may instead use online services that allow remotely located doctors to make virtual diagnoses, using imaging and voice technology, and write electronic prescriptions.

Some will argue that the bond between doctor and patient is so entrenched in the consulting room that it will never be supplanted by the internet, other than at the fringes of healthcare and for isolated populations.

But I believe consumer forces will result in significant expansion of online consultation. Whether the NHS takes advantage of the scale economies offered by remote prescribing remains to be seen, but the private sector will undoubtedly act to meet consumer needs. This presents an interesting challenge for healthcare communicators.



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## Views in brief

### **You're in charge of the NHS for the day. What one change would you make?**

Establish a national programme of cash incentives for people who make efforts to improve their health.

### **Tell us about an unsung hero in healthcare**

The pharmacist. A wealth of knowledge and expertise not used enough by PCTs.

### **What did you learn from the most challenging healthcare comms task in which you have been involved?**

People struggle to understand the difference between hazard and risk. I learned this trying to reassure the public about the health impact of genetically modified foods.

The boundary between health communicators and practitioners has always been well defined. The consultation room is not a medium (unless you count posters enjoining us to wash our hands) and the closest the media get to diagnosis is the advice doled out to anonymous readers in columns penned by media medics. Now, with the rise of online diagnosis, the consumer and clinical domains have the potential to collide like never before.

As ever with new departures, it is

easier to see the dangers than the opportunities. Effective clinical governance and regulation should ensure that patients are not prescribed inappropriate treatments when they access reputable online services, but the challenge for healthcare communicators is more complex.

The barriers between editorial content, patient forums and diagnostic and prescribing services could become hazy in the online environment. Will media owners, whose audiences implicitly

trust the health information they provide, be tempted to translate that trust into revenue by providing access to online consultation and prescribing? (There is a precedent in financial comparison sites.) Might patient advocacy groups follow a similar path?

Communication that drives consumers to a website, and in particular a transactional website, is much easier to evaluate than activities designed to drive brand values or educate public and clinical audiences.

So, as online diagnosis and prescription services expand, there is likely to be a growing demand for PR activity that drives traffic to these services. PROs will need to mine their deepest reserves of creativity to persuade potentially sceptical media to direct their audiences to such services – and they will need to resist the temptation to use hyperbole and misdirection to do so.

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