USE OF E-HEALTH IN GENERAL PRACTICES DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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Background and purpose

The covid-19 pandemic has impacted health care delivery worldwide, including general practice care. The aim of this study is 1) to investigate the impact of this pandemic on the use of e-health in Dutch general practices 2) to study their intention to continue using e-health more intensively after the pandemic 3) to explore differences in the use of e-health between three practice types (solo, duo and group practices).

Methods – Web surveys were sent to all Dutch general practices in April and July 2020. These surveys queried the use of 5 specific e-health tools: 1) e-consultation 2) video consultation 3) request of repeat prescriptions online 4) teleconsultations 5) telemonitoring. The intention to continue the use of e-health more intensively, was asked for each of the e-health applications practices were using. In addition, practice characteristics were collected and recorded as: solo, duo, group. Data were analyzed as descriptives using means and standard deviations; differences between practice types were tested using f-tests (ANOVA).

Results – Response rates were 35% (n=1,443) in April and 17% (n=719) in July. The pandemic caused an increase in the use of video and e-consultations (Figure 1). In July, almost all practices used e-health (98%). Especially, the usage of e-consultations and request of repeat prescriptions online was high (Figure 2). A minority of practices intended to maintain the increased use of e-health after the pandemic (32% or less; Figure 2). Comparing the three practice types, we only found significant differences ($p < 0.05$) in the first time use of teleconsultations and the intensified use of e-consultations (April) and in the use of teleconsultations (July, see Table 1).

Figure 1 – % of practices with first time use or intensified use of specified e-health apps, caused by the pandemic (n=1,083; April)

Conclusions

- Uptake of e-health in Dutch general practices increased during the first period of the covid-19 pandemic
- Most practices do not intend to continue the increased use of e-health in the future
- Small differences were found in the use of e-health applications between solo, duo, and group practices.

Figure 2 – % of practices that use specified e-health apps, and the intention to continue using these more intensively (n=718-732; July)

Table 1. Percentage of practices that were using e-health, specified by practice type and e-health application (July)

Practice type	E-consultation	Request repeat prescriptions online	Video consultation	Teleconsultation*	Telemonitoring
Solo practice (n=149)	83% (SD=0.38)	81% (SD=0.39)	44% (SD=0.50)	51% (SD=0.50)	8% (SD=0.27)
Duo practice (n=304)	83% (SD=0.38)	87% (SD=0.33)	51% (SD=0.50)	67% (SD=0.47)	12% (SD=0.32)
Group practice (n=282)	83% (SD=0.37)	88% (SD=0.33)	56% (SD=0.50)	70% (SD=0.46)	13% (SD=0.34)
Total (n=735)	83% (SD=0.38)	86% (SD=0.35)	51% (SD=0.50)	65% (SD=0.48)	12% (SD=0.32)

* $p < 0.05$; SD = Standard Deviation