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Technology could play a pivotal role in reducing the strain on the primary care workforce

This report outlines key challenges in ensuring equitable access to healthcare. As primary care faces significant pressures from increasing demand, there is a risk of over-reliance on the workforce to meet these needs. By rethinking the role of existing and emerging digital technologies, we empower patients to access services more appropriately. This makes it possible to mitigate inappropriate demand on general practice and free up clinical capacity to focus on patients with more complex health needs.

Communities in deprived areas, often with high ethnic diversity, face an array of health and access disparities. These areas not only experience elevated rates of chronic illness and mental health issues but are also disproportionately impacted by shortages of GPs. Demand continues to outpace capacity, even in less deprived areas, and as a result, primary care services are having to be more reactive than proactive, increasing reliance on emergency services and driving up costs.

The difficulty in attracting clinicians to these high-need areas further intensifies these challenges. Under-resourced practices often experience higher turnover and burnout, creating a cycle that strains both patients and providers.

Digital poverty adds an additional barrier for many patients, limiting their ability to use online health resources and self-service options designed to reduce demand on primary care. This makes it harder for patients to access the very tools in place to provide faster, more convenient care.

Addressing these challenges requires making the most of existing digital infrastructure. We believe that by integrating technologies like cloud telephony, unified communications, and AI-enabled healthcare tools, practices can alleviate the pressure on GPs and other clinicians. These tools offer a streamlined approach to demand management, encouraging patients to self-serve for non-urgent needs while enabling clinicians to focus on more complex, preventive care. This shift supports better patient outcomes and helps balance demand across primary care services.

Remote or digital GP roles can also be highly effective in these contexts, especially when 'space in the surgery' is a barrier to recruitment. Unified communication systems and secure cloud-based telephony that are fully integrated into clinical systems, enable practitioners to facilitate phone and video consultations from anywhere. This approach requires minimal additional resources and provides patients with convenient access to care without needing to visit a practice in person.

Cloud-based telephony and unified communications solutions offer a cost-effective entry point to digital healthcare, especially for those with limited internet access or digital literacy. By integrating voice and text interactions with online health systems, and offering translation services, these technologies create an inclusive digital pathway, making healthcare more accessible for diverse communities. This bridge between phone and online



services helps patients become familiar with digital tools in a more gradual and supportive manner.

The continued crisis in recruitment invites the idea that existing technology can play a pivotal role in improving patient outcomes and reducing the strain on the primary care workforce when used well. While we accept that systematic change requires more, such as incentives for clinician recruitment in high-need areas, support for automated care navigation, and AI-powered triage, embracing technology would make a difference today. By harnessing available digital tools, practices can relieve some of the immediate pressures on the primary care workforce.

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