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E- mail consultations - patients and practitioners have different approaches.

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Background and Aim: The few extant Danish studies on e-mail consultations were undertaken before it became mandatory under Danish law to offer patients this form of consultation. This study investigates the ways in which patients and general practitioners communicate with each other by e-mail, explore factors influencing this means of communication and puts into perspective the potential of e-mail consultations in patient treatment.

Material and Methods: The study is explorative and based on an individual interview and four qualitative focus group interviews. The empirical data were analysed from a social constructivist and a practice-theoretical approach.

Results: The study indicated that patients wanted to be able to use the general practitioner (GP) as a sparring partner in e-mail consultations. They expected a reply in case of uncertainties. The GPs found it difficult to handle complicated medical problems by e-mail and they tended to send a standard reply. A number of patients perceived the wording of the standard reply as a rejection of their problem. Patients highlighted the logistical advantages of e-mail consultations, the physical separation of doctor and patient which made it easier for them to disclose psychological or intimate issues. The GPs preferred short uncomplicated questions with no option for the patient to enter into a discussion.

Conclusion: Patients and GPs have different approaches to e-mail. The development of clear guidelines for patients and revised guidelines for GPs regarding e-mail consultations is therefore recommended.