

OP22.5

Doctor, you've got mail: the impact of email in primary health assessment

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Background & Aim: Nowadays, healthcare routines are heavily dependent on new technologies and clinical information is registered in electronic format. It is crucial, therefore, to know how to use digital resources to support patient care. In addition, society is changing. With the economic crisis many people have moved from their birthplace and cannot attend consultations on a regular basis with their family doctor. In order to overcome this issue some family doctors have started using email to exchange clinical information with patients. The aim of this paper is to consider the benefits of using email for assessment and to characterize the patient who uses this tool.

Method: Observational cross-sectional descriptive research that analysed the use of the email in the years 2014 and 2015 in a family health centre in a Portuguese city (Coimbra). One month was selected to analyse the users of email in terms of gender, age, email subject and the kind of user (patient, relative, healthcare provider or other). The software used for this study was Microsoft Office Excel and Word.

Results: Between 2014 and 2015 the total number of direct or/and indirect contacts with the patient decreased by 279. In the same period, the number of appointments decreased by about 134. Regarding the number of emails, there was an annual increase of 186.

Conclusions: From 2014 to 2015 the number of appointments decreased and the use of email increased. The use of email enabled a significant change in access to medical care, specifically, advice and follow up, which left more time available to attend patients with acute or chronic conditions. Future studies may reveal that the use of email has a positive impact on the patient-doctor relationship and in raising patient satisfaction.