What is important for the patient in online and telephone counselling? A literature review

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To explore how health care professionals communicate with patients in written and telephone consultations, and how they ensure patient-centred care and involvement in these formats.

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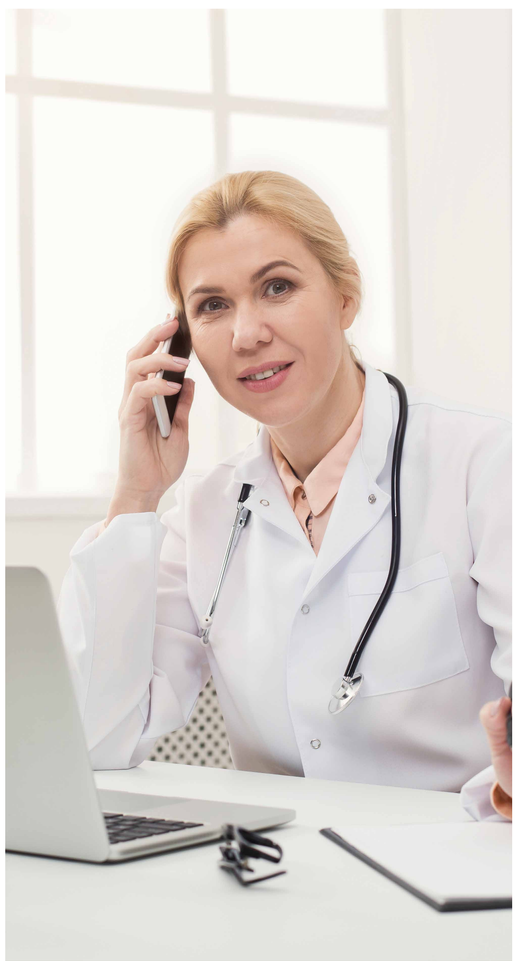
Background

During and after the COVID-19 pandemic, digital communication between health care professionals and patients has become increasingly prevalent.

In 2019–2020, Pharmakon conducted a literature review examining how digital communication platforms such as telephone, virtual, and written interactions affect the relationship between patients and health care professionals.

The review showed that these platforms impact the interaction between patients and health care professionals both positively and negatively, highlighting the importance for health care professionals to be aware of the opportunities and limitations of different platforms.



Methods

A literature review was conducted using PubMed and PsycInfo (updated March 2024), focusing on digital communication, relational techniques and interaction analysis. Inclusion criteria emphasized studies in the Scandinavian languages or English on non-visual, synchronous and asynchronous communication.

Results

From a total of 101, 31 studies were included.

Written communication – key findings

- **Efficiency and flexibility:**
  Written communication can alleviate the burden on health care professionals. E-consultations are used in 21 % of general practice consultations in Denmark.
- **Patient experience:**
  Written communication increases patient involvement. Patients appreciate the flexibility and the ability to reflect and reread messages, which fosters a sense of calm and control.
- **Professional perspective:**
  Health care professionals see both opportunities and limitations in written communication. Written communication supports efficiency but may be unsuitable for sensitive topics, and some professionals fear overcommunication.
- **Relational strategies:**
  Empathy, clarity, and summarizing patients' statements enhance understanding and trust.
- **Challenges:**
  Due to the lack of structured frameworks for written patient communication, health care professionals often rely on interpersonal experiences from private written conversations as a reference.

Telephone communication – key findings

- **Structure:**
  Calls follow a structured sequence: greeting, problem presentation, assessment, advice, and closure.
- **Empathy and engagement:**
  Vocal cues (e.g. laughter, tone of voice) and models like the VALUE model support empathetic, patient-centred dialogue.

The VALUE model includes the following steps:

- Value the patient's statements
- Acknowledge emotions
- Listen attentively
- Understand the patient as a whole person
- Elicit questions

- **Patient involvement:**
  Patients often initiate agenda-setting, and open-ended questions can further enhance engagement.
- **Challenges:**
  Less opportunity for relationship-building and data collection than in face-to-face consultations, particularly the absence of visual diagnostic cues, makes phone consultations suitable for non-complex issues and follow-ups.

Recommendations for practice

- To ensure patient-centred communication, health professionals must focus on patient contributions and use techniques that enhance dialogue, e.g. **open-ended questions**, to invite patient input.
- Apply **empathetic language** and vocal cues to build rapport.
- Provide **clear, concise, and personalized responses**.
- Recognize the **limits of digital formats** and refer to in-person consultations when necessary
- Train **digital communication competencies**, including emotional sensitivity and structured messaging.

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Conclusion

Written and telephone consultations are valuable tools for enhancing access and efficiency in health care. However, maintaining patient-centredness requires deliberate strategies such as empathetic communication, structured interaction and awareness of the limitations of the platform. The next step in the research project is to collect and analyse data on how community pharmacies communicate on these platforms.