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## **Near Me clocks up one millionth consultation**

### **Video consulting 'a real success story'**

The ground-breaking system that allows clinicians to consult with patients by video link has been used for the millionth time in Scotland.

The Scottish Government's Digital Health and Care Technology Enabled Care team has revealed that the millionth consultation using the Near Me platform involved a psychologist and a Fife patient.

Near Me was initially used mainly in rural and island communities in the north of the country, where distances between patients and health staff can be an issue. Its use was rapidly ramped up by the Scottish Government at the start of the Covid-19 pandemic and it is increasingly seen as an indispensable healthcare tool.

"To have recorded one million Near Me consultations in such a relatively short period is quite remarkable," said Margaret Whoriskey, head of Technology Enabled Care and Digital Healthcare Innovation. "Throughout the country healthcare professionals have come to value Near Me as a useful and easy-to-use means of communication and passing the one million mark shows that many patients and clients are also comfortable with video consultation.

"To use the over-used cliché, Near Me has become part of the new normal. It's proving to be a real success story, so much so that it is now being rolled out across the wider public and third sector."

The millionth consultation was carried out last month by assistant psychologist Kimberley Elston, of NHS Fife's eating disorder advanced intervention team, who said: "Near Me has been invaluable for us being able to see patients throughout the pandemic. Due to reduced travel times for all involved we are able to offer more appointments. As restrictions ease, having Near Me as an option allows patient and department flexibility".

Kimberley's head of department, consultant clinical psychologist Andrew Summers, said that in mental health cases Near Me consultations were often better than those conducted over the phone.

"We can gain a lot of information about a patient's mental state simply by seeing their face," he said. "But Near Me is also useful for many patients as they don't have to leave their own home for a consultation, saving them time and travel costs and removing the need to sit in waiting areas, which can be a source of anxiety for some people.

"We have been doing most of our appointments digitally during the lockdown and I have no doubt that Near Me will continue to be an important part of our service provision post-pandemic."

Covid-19 was unheard of in Scotland when in December 2016 Dr Steve Baguley, a consultant in sexual health and HIV with NHS Grampian, became the first person to use Near Me clinically. NHS Grampian provided sexual health and HIV services in Orkney and Shetland and Dr Baguley used Near Me to consult with an islander who was concerned about a rash.

“Getting access to a main hospital can be tremendously challenging for people in some island communities,” said Dr Baguley. “Near Me allowed this particular patient to have a consultation with me without travelling from home and it allowed me to get a good look at his rash.”

He added: “Tele-consulting doesn’t always work in my field as patients invariably need blood or urine tests and hands-on treatment. But it’s great for people who do not necessarily have to come in to see a clinician.”

Dr Baguley, who is Clinical Director of eHealth for NHS Grampian and clinical chair of Scotland’s Health Board Digital Leads group, added: “From being something of a niche communications tool Near Me has quickly become an important option available to patients. Obviously, its use has expanded greatly during the pandemic. Looking to the future, consulting as we know it will be very different in the years ahead and video will have a massively important role to play in that.”

In September 2020, the Technology Enabled Care team revealed the results of a survey of 5,400 people on the use of Near Me. It found that there was strong support for the use of video consulting for health and care appointments in Scotland, with 87 per cent of the public and 94 per cent of clinicians believing that it should be offered for appointments.

The survey attracted over 4,000 responses from members of the public and over 1,100 from healthcare professionals. There were also responses from organisations representing people with different health and care needs, such as cancer, inequalities, mental health, older people and end-of-life care. Many of these groups are continuing to use Near Me but there are plans to widen its use to a wider range of public services, including social care, independent care, the third sector and the housing sector.

Near Me features largely in the Technology Enabled Care team’s recently-published Digital Citizen Deliver Plan 2021/22, which points out that the service is used for around 20,000 consultations every week throughout NHS Scotland.

“Scaling up video consultations is a key national priority”, the delivery plan states, adding that there are plans to progress the scaling-up of Near Me “to allow greater and more convenient access to both routine care and specialist support from anywhere in the country”.

## **Notes to editor**

Remote consultations are being carried out in the first instance by telephone but Near Me is used if a video link is felt to be more appropriate. Patients offered a Near Me appointment at home will need to have a device for making a video call, such as a smartphone, tablet or computer with webcam, and a reliable internet connection. As with any other appointment, patients must first contact their GP practice and it will arrange for an appointment to be booked in the normal manner. This may be by telephone, virtual or face to face. To use the system patients are given a link to a Near Me clinic and can start their video call from this link. The system checks that they have everything in place for a Near Me call and then asks the patient to enter his or her name and date of birth. The patient is then held in a secure waiting room until the clinician joins the video call. Once the clinician joins, the consultation takes place as normal.

Near Me is web-based and is powered by a video consulting platform called Attend Anywhere which was procured for national use across Scotland by the Scottish Government. Attend Anywhere is an Australian company that has been providing video consulting services in Australia for many years.

General information about Near Me is available at [www.nearme.scot](http://www.nearme.scot)

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