

Access to General Practice during COVID-19—a cross-sectional view of the opinions of adults who use social media

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Abstract

Background/Aim: Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, virtual consultations have become commonplace, and access to healthcare more complex. The study was designed to examine the impact COVID-19 has had on access to general practice care in Ireland.

Methods: A 25-question online survey was designed in Qualtrics®. Adult patients of Irish general practices were recruited via social media between October 2020 and February 2021 and volunteered their opinions. The data was further examined for associations between participant groupings and key findings using chi-squared tests.

Results: 670 persons participated. Half of all doctor-patient consultations during that time were completed virtually, predominantly via telephone. Overall, 497 (78%) participants accessed their healthcare teams as scheduled, and without disruption. 18% of participants (n=104) reported difficulty in accessing their long-term medications; those who were younger, and those who typically attend general practice on a quarterly or more basis, were associated most with this disruption ($p < 0.05$; $p < 0.05$). Fifty-nine instances where a new health concern was subject to an appointment cancellation or rescheduling were reported.

Conclusions: Despite the COVID-19 pandemic, Irish general practice has maintained its schedule for appointments in greater than three quarters of cases. Half of the consultations were provided virtually, which is a novel development in routine care. Maintaining the prescription of long-term medications for patients remains a challenge. A protocol may need to be designed by each practice to optimize the continuation of care and continuation of medication schedules during any future pandemics.

Keywords: survey, Ireland, general practice, healthcare, access, COVID-19

Tables

Number	Participant Binary Groupings
1	<i>Age: ≤ 44 or ≥ 45 years</i>
2	<i>Gender: Male or Female</i>
3	<i>Education level: Completed no further than second level in education or attended third level (University etc.)</i>
4	<i>Cost: Private patients, or any primary care reimbursement scheme (PCRS) patient</i>
5	<i>Attendance frequency: attendance quarterly/more frequently or less frequently than that.</i>
Number	Study Findings- Binary Groupings
1	<i>Appointment cancelled during the pandemic-yes/no</i>
2	<i>Appointment rescheduled during the pandemic-yes/no</i>
3	<i>Medication regime disrupted during the pandemic-yes/no</i>
4	<i>Took advice outside of GP during the pandemic-yes/no</i>
5	<i>Satisfied with length of appointment during the pandemic-satisfied or not satisfied/unsure</i>

Table 1. Binary Groups (Participant and Study-finding)

Demographic	Value	Frequency	%
<i>Age</i>	44 or less	425	66.72
	≥ 45	212	33.28
	<i>Total</i>	637	
<i>Sex</i>	Male	91	14.35
	Female	541	85.33
	Others	1	0.16
	Prefer not to answer	1	0.16
	<i>Total</i>	634	
<i>Education level</i>	Leaving certificate [#] or lower	126	19.8
	Third Level Education	507	80.04
	Other	1	0.16
	<i>Total</i>	634	
<i>Medical service status</i>	Private	443	69.5
	Only PCRS*	194	30.5
	<i>Total</i>	637	
<i>Frequency of attendance</i>	Attended GP less frequently than quarterly	476	74.8
	Attended GP quarterly or more	160	25.2
	<i>Total</i>	636	

*: PCRS – Primary Care reimbursement service

#: Leaving certificate is the examination taken at the end of formal secondary level schooling in Ireland

Table 2. Population demographics of survey participants

Poster reference list

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