



eConsult: A case study on supporting timely access to specialist advice, reducing anxiety and decreasing unnecessary referrals

eConsult facilitates prompt access to and communication between primary care providers and specialists, allowing for better-informed recommendations for the primary care provider and timely advice and reassurance to patients. This reduces not only unnecessary referrals to specialists, but also patient anxiety and expectations for urgent referrals.

The findings from the Healthcare Experience Survey (2013-2016)¹ conducted by the Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care illustrate that in Waterloo Wellington:

34% of residents were advised by their health care provider to see a specialist in the past 12 months

Length of time residents waited to see the specialist



Based on a national physician survey, the referring process poses common frustrations for referring primary care providers, including: finding an available specialist, no receipt of referral, not being informed of appointment times, and no information for follow-up treatment.² For a primary care clinic, this can translate into additional staff work to confirm receipt of referral, relay information between specialist and patient on appointment times, and track information on treatment plan post-specialist visit. The availability of eConsult has shown promise in satisfying primary care needs for quick access to helpful information, enhancing the quality of patient care and avoiding a referral to a specialist.^{3,4}

Dr. Alison Yeung, a primary care provider at a Waterloo Family Health Organization, adopted OTN eConsult in January 2017, and uses it approximately three times per month to provide timely treatment decisions with patients. Thus far, she has found the following benefits for herself and her specialist colleagues:

8/10 eConsults

Dr. Yeung conducted to date **avoided referrals to specialists**

Specialists reply to eConsults in **days, NOT months**

Specialists receive more **appropriate referrals**

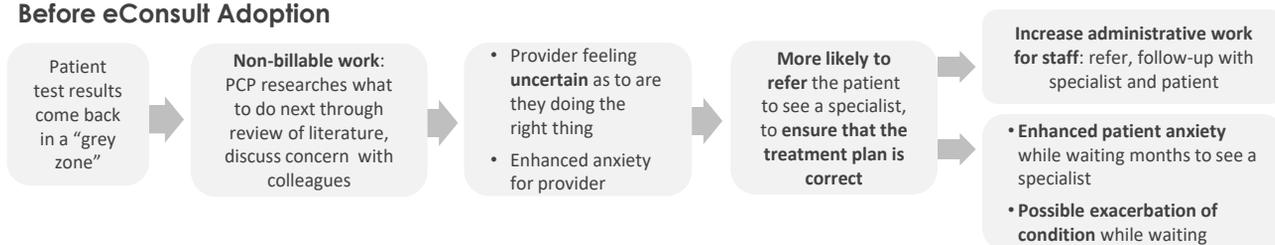
Specialists can **bill for their time**

“eConsult has changed my practice in such a positive way. There are so many situations where a patient really doesn't need to see a specialist face-to-face, and the physical exam won't change their management. eConsult is perfect for these situations. It takes me about 5-10 minutes to send off depending how complex the case is, and I typically get a response within a couple days. It reduces staff workload, I'm able to communicate to patients quickly which alleviates anxiety, and it makes me more confident that I'm properly managing the case. The fact that you're paid for the time you put in doesn't hurt either!”

- Dr. Alison Yeung, Waterloo Family Health Organization

The figure below illustrates Dr. Yeung's experience before the adoption of eConsult, and benefits experienced after the adoption of eConsult.

Before eConsult Adoption



After eConsult Adoption



Two case examples from Dr. Yeung:

In one instance, when a patient came to an appointment with lab results in the "grey zone", Dr. Yeung was able to consult a nephrology specialist who provided her with an expert explanation that she could relay to the patient within a few days, thereby reducing patient anxiety regarding the treatment plan. Dr. Yeung can now use this knowledge with her future patients as well.

In another example, Dr. Yeung used eConsult with a urologist to determine whether a calcification in the testicles put a patient at risk for testicular cancer. The specialist informed her of the most recent evidence and she was able to confidently follow up with the patient without needing a referral to the urologist.

Both of these examples highlight timely access to specialist information and a reduction in the need for referral.

If you have any questions or would like further information on this case study, contact communications@ehealthce.ca.

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Works Cited:

1. MOHLC (2016). Healthcare Experience Survey Results: Waterloo-Wellington LHIN.
2. Canadian Medical Association (2012). Experience with Referrals: Results of two surveys.
3. Liddy, C., Afkham, A., Drosinis, P., Joschko, H, Keely, E. (2015). Impact of and Satisfaction with a New eConsult Service: A Mixed Methods Study of Primary Care Providers. JABFM. 28(3): 394-403.
4. Tran, C., Liddy, C., Pinto, N., Keely, E. (2016). Impact of Question Content on e-Consultation Outcomes. Telemedicine and e-Health. 22(3): 216-222.

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