

# Take the plunge!

**Matt Murphy** says now is the time to take dive into the world of online services and join the growing number of GP practices and patients who have already taken that leap of faith

The move to online services in general practice takes a major leap forward this month (April) when the new GP contract in England comes into force. It requires GPs to offer patients online repeat prescriptions and appointments, and as a minimum, give patients access to their summary care record by April 2015. EMIS pioneered online patient services for general practice and a growing number of GP practices and patients are embracing them. Now, over 525,000 patients use our Patient Access service, which is offered by three in five EMIS practices in England – a figure that's set to grow exponentially in the next few months now that the contract is agreed. The take up of online services may have been slow to gather speed, but the evidence is that GPs are now realising the benefits for themselves and their patients. GPs are convinced – what about their patients? One concern is that older people and those who are less well-off will be left behind by the move online, as not everyone has a home computer.

That's not borne out by the facts. A demographic breakdown of Patient Access users showed that almost one in four is over 55, and one in five is on a low income.

## In-depth

Online health services are the norm for younger patients, who live their lives on their smartphones. In Sheffield, over a third of all appointments with the University Health Service are booked online, and 50% of diabetic patients book clinic appointments online.

Ben Hallsworth, Medical Records Summariser at the University said: 'It's such a popular service. It saves our reception staff considerable time – it takes pressure off them and the phone lines during the busy early morning period and allows them to spend more time helping patients who have more in-depth enquiries.'

Patients with long-term conditions are enthusiastic advocates of online services, too. MS patient Andrea Hartley from Hyde in

**The survey says...**  
A recent survey by Patient.co.uk of 22,000-plus respondents\* found that:

- 77% of GPs support the use of online appointment booking and repeat prescriptions
- 96% of GPs believe their patients are ready for online services

Cheshire takes seven different drugs prescribed by her GP, Dr Lisa Gutteridge. She also has to make monthly visits to the local hospital for intravenous drug therapy to control her MS symptoms. Patient Access allows Andrea to request repeat prescriptions via her laptop and have them delivered to her door, and to view test results. Andrea also appreciates being able to read hospital reports to her GP from specialist staff treating her MS, without waiting weeks to receive a letter in the post. She says: 'I feel that I am taking more of a part in my treatment by seeing how my MS is progressing month by month, and understanding what is going on.'

## Active

Dr Gutteridge, a partner at Houghton Thornley Medical Centre in Hyde, Cheshire, says: 'Andrea is one of a growing number of patients who are taking a more active part in their health care through online records access. It is extremely useful for patients who have long-term conditions



Matt Murphy is managing director of EMIS. To find out more about Patient Access, visit [patient.co.uk/patient-access](http://patient.co.uk/patient-access).

that need regular prescriptions and visits to the surgery.'

EMIS is constantly refining its software in consultation with users. The next version of Patient Access will give GPs more control, allowing them to configure the elements of the medical record that they want patients to see. For example, they may wish to restrict access to key information such as allergies and medications, or to only show free text information from a specific date when the online record is switched on. The medical record viewer will also be available to patients via the mobile app, making it easier for them to access. For example, during a hospital visit they could bring up their medication and allergy history and show it to a clinician. This new software is currently in development and we hope it will be available to EMIS Web users by this summer.

## References

\*Patient.co.uk annual survey (October 2013) [22,785 respondents]

## Silver surfers

Working GPs have evidence of the growth in silver surfers. Dr Anant Sharma, a GP at Bilston Health Centre in Wolverhampton believes age is no barrier, saying: 'Our oldest Patient Access user is 91.'

Dr Sharma is an enthusiastic advocate of the Patient Access app, which can be downloaded free to any smartphone, allowing patients to book and cancel appointments, order repeat prescriptions and send secure messages to the practice at the touch of a button. His practice is making the most of the new technology by actively signing up as many patients as possible to Patient Access when they come into the surgery. More than 900 out of 3,200 patients now have a password to use Patient Access and the app, with a robust security process for users. He says: 'I believe putting patients in charge of booking (and cancelling) their own appointments means they are more likely to turn up. We think it will reduce DNAs.'

Other benefits at Dr Sharma's surgery are a reduction in incoming calls and queues at reception and better medication compliance, by making it easier for patients to request repeat prescriptions.

He concludes: 'Patient Access now does work that my staff don't have to do. That means my staff now have time and ability to do other vital and increasing work.'