

# E – CONSULTANCY – CONNECTING DOCTORS WITH PATIENTS IN A NETWORK

# **Abstract**

# How healthcare is being transformed by online self-management, startups & digitally savvy HCPs

**The healthcare industry has traditionally lagged behind the likes of retail, travel, and financial services in the adoption of digital technologies.**

However, in recent years there have been significant strides made in this area – particularly when it comes to using digital to interact and engage with patients.

Econsultancy’s ‘[Embracing Technology in Pharma and Healthcare’](https://econsultancy.com/reports/embracing-technology-and-innovation-in-digital-marketing-pharma-and-healthcare/) Best Practice Guide addresses this trend and other related topics in depth. In the meantime, here’s a summary of the key trends driving change – and a few examples of new companies taking advantage.

It’s a well-known fact that you should never Google your symptoms. However – partly driven by stretched healthcare services – today’s digitally-savvy consumers seem to be increasingly turning online (at the onset of symptoms) rather than consulting real-life doctors.

In fact, Google data shows that one in every 20 online searches is health related. Similarly, other research suggests that [53% of patients](https://get.health/research) will look up a health-related topic online, while only 32% will consult their doctor first. When it comes to trust – this is also surprisingly high. 78% of US survey respondents said they would be extremely likely or very likely to trust health-related information if it came from a physician’s or hospital website, though less so from pharmaceutical or medical device companies.

But what category do social and data-driven services like [PatientsLikeMe](https://www.patientslikeme.com/) or [HealthUnlocked](https://healthunlocked.com/) fall under? Perhaps somewhere in the middle, these new and fast-growing networks collate data from online users – including information about conditions, symptoms, and treatments etc. – and use it to point others in the direction of a diagnosis or right path to treatment.

Interestingly, these sites are not just serving as a supplementary to traditional healthcare – PatientsLikeMe in particular has proven to generate real success. A [report from Neurology](http://n.neurology.org/content/early/2015/06/17/WNL.0000000000001728) states that epilepsy patients using information on the network increased their self-management and self-efficacy scores significantly compared to a control group.

Overall, these networks appear to be contributing to a shift in dynamics, whereby healthcare is becoming user-driven rather than rooted in doctor-patient relationships.

### Start-ups with focus

In the past couple of years, new start-ups companies have begun to take advantage of this digital shift – using technology to offer new services in healthcare. While fitness trackers have played their part, artificial intelligence is now being utilised in new ways, particularly when it comes to treatment of more specific conditions rather than general practice.

Take [Kaia](https://www.kaia-health.com/?locale=en), for example, which is an app that offers users physiotherapy to alleviate back-pain, as well as combined techniques from physiotherapy and psychology to help relieve symptoms of chronic obstructive pulmonary disease. The app uses AI-motion-tracking technology to ensure that patients are able to safely and effectively exercise at home.

SkinVision is another app that uses machine learning technology, this time to give users a risk assessment for skin cancer. The company also offers an annual programme for at-risk patients who need regular and on-going skin checks.

In the UK, companies are capitalising on the wellbeing trend. Thriva – described as a ‘preventative healthcare service’ – sends customers a finger-prick blood testing kit to uncover underlying conditions, as well as offer health advice to improve general wellbeing over time.

What each of these startups has in common is an insight into common frustrations within the healthcare industry – such as a lack of accessibility or long waiting times – and a way to use technology to revolutionise a service.

Of course, it’s not only start-up companies that are driving this change. Within the NHS there has been significant effort made to keep up with consumer demand for accessibility, which naturally veers towards digital. A growing number of GP surgeries in the UK are being offered video consultation technology, which allows them to speak to patients that cannot get into the surgery, as well as to streamline appointments and reduce waiting times.

### Digitally-empowered HCPs

Whether working in privately funded or national health services – it’s also clear that healthcare professionals are becoming just as digitally-savvy, using technology to research, communicate, and treat patients.

According to research, over [88% of physicians](https://www.adweek.com/digital/pius-boachie-guest-post-3-ways-social-media-revolutionized-medical-care/) use the internet and social media to research pharmaceutical, biotech, and medical devices, while 76% of physicians are using mobile devices in their practice.

Another trend is doctor-focused social networks, which allow healthcare professionals to crowdsource medical opinion. In other words – to ask other doctors for their own experience or opinions on specific patient cases (which are all kept anonymous). Sermo is perhaps the biggest example of this, with the platform currently at 800,000 members in 150 different countries.

Elsewhere, healthcare professionals – perhaps more so in the US – are increasingly using social media to build their own profiles and connect with patients. While his position as CNN medical reporter has certainly raised his profile, Dr Sanjay Gupta is also a practicing neurosurgeon, and he currently has 2.4m Twitter followers. This level of reach allows Gupta and others like him to communicate with patients on a personal level, as well as answer health-related queries and share authoritative content.

These platforms can also be effective for spreading awareness for campaigns or specific disease outbreaks. For example, the Centre for Disease Control and Prevention took to Twitter in 2016 to warn people of the risk of Zika, utilising the platform to continually raise awareness of the issue and to minimise the spread of the disease.