Softphone app to save NHS up to £20 million in GP triage call costs

UK cloud telephony specialist X-on secures Innovate UK grant for a pioneering app eliminating large proportion of GP practice-patient call costs from increased remote consultation in Covid-19 pandemic

GPs and patients are to benefit from a new softphone app that will eliminate almost all the "hidden cost" of calls for remote consultations and is forecast to save the NHS as much as £20 million over three years.

The app will mean patient calls to their GP are free and in turn reduce the cost to GPs and practices for outgoing calls by around 75%. Its development is aimed at addressing the significant financial impact in primary care of practice-to-patient calls as telephone "triage" has developed as the new consultation model during the Covid-19 pandemic.

The app is being developed by UK cloud telephony and primary care communications specialist X-on, supported by a significant six figure grant from the Government's Innovation Funding Service, part of Innovate UK, the UK's innovation agency. It is due to be available to GPs and their practices across England, Wales and Scotland from February 2021.

Dr Dustyn Saint, a GP partner at the Long Stratton Medical Partnership, at Tharston in Norfolk, is one of thousands of doctors who have seen their practice bills spiral from the changing nature of doctor-patient consultation.

He said: "We have noticed a big increase in telephone costs between 2019 and 2020. We've needed to purchase many additional lines as the move to telephone as the first point of contact left us with nowhere near enough to manage demand. This, and the volumes of calls we are now making, especially to mobile, have really pushed up costs."

The software, for use on iPhone or Android smartphones, will plug into existing patient apps to extend patient access and closely integrate with patient clinical record systems, whilst crucially ensuring data security and confidentiality. X-on has already established a number of partnerships with app providers for roll-out of the softphone app and more are under discussion.

The app is built on a unified digital communications platform that also incorporates traditional telephony as a supporting channel option, and enables a switch to video consultation if necessary.

Under the initiative, patients' call costs are eliminated when using the app, and for practice or GP calls to patients they are significantly reduced through a funding formula principally based on growth forecasts.

The new softphone app will be immediately available to patients of the 700 GP practices that currently have X-on's key cloud telephony Surgery Connect practice network product or its GP@Home softphone homeworking product. Other practices will be able to benefit from cost savings by taking on Surgery Connect or a new embedded "omnichannel" communication platform that will also be launched early in 2021.

Development of digital telephony has been an essential channel for GPs and the NHS in creating a digital "front door" to enable more productive primary care, as outlined in the NHS Long Term Plan.

But during the Covid-19 crisis primary care has rapidly evolved, with an increase in remote consultation and GP homeworking resulting in GP practice calls made to patients more than

doubling despite investment in video and online consultations. According to [NHS Digital statistics for August 2020](#) this trend is continuing with telephone consultations exceeding video and online by more than 99:1.

The impact on the NHS from the cost of such calls is substantial, estimated at an annual £50 million, with more than 90% of GP calls going to a mobile. In addition many calls are being made from GP personal mobiles due to homeworking, causing a serious risk to information governance from patient data being visible on private devices and bills. GPs often experience difficulty in contacting patients who are less likely to answer a call from a personal or withheld number.

Aside from use as a voice communications channel, the new softphone app will also have versatility to carry notification messages targeted at individual patients which would be normally delivered via SMS, such as flu jab, appointment and prescription information. This will also contribute to cost savings.

Paul Bensley, managing director of X-on, said: "In the last few months, primary care has undergone radical change in its delivery and the way in which GPs and patients make contact with each other, primarily through remote consultation.

"With the increase in telephone calls as a result, one seldom noted impact is the spiralling 'hidden cost' to GPs and practices in contacting patients, often when GPs are working from home. Our innovation offers a significant answer to the issue, almost completely removing the financial implications for practices as primary care continues to evolve, so that GPs can focus on providing high quality patient care.

"It offers a sustainable option that supports effective remote consultation and its development, and also ensures that traditional telephony channels remain available and that no patient group is disadvantaged."

Ends

Notes for editors

About X-on
X-on is a pioneer of cloud telephony, and was named as the UK Technology/ Digital Solution Provider of the Year in the 2019 General Practice Awards for its Surgery Connect product**.** In 2020 we won the Best VoIP Software and Best VoIP Vertical Solution categories in the Internet Telephony Services Providers' Association (ITSPA) awards. With over 20 years' experience, we have worked with thousands of customers across many industries to deliver simple communications choices to benefit their business. We work with healthcare professionals to provide cost-effective communications systems such as Surgery Connect, which is tailored to their needs, and allows them to spend time and money on what matters most - patients.

● Find out more about our services for healthcare**:** http://www.x-on.co.uk/healthcare
● Find out more about Surgery Connect at: http://www.surgeryconnect.co.uk