

Will digital self-management be more acceptable in a post-covid world?

A reflection on the impact of the Covid 19 pandemic on my PhD thesis. Rebecca Hunter.



In early March, I was given ethical clearance to proceed with my study. I was now able to recruit NHS patients and staff for a series of recorded interviews and focus group to discuss theories around digital self-management programmes for people with chronic low back pain (CLBP). Then, on March 23rd 2020, to prevent the spread of Covid 19, the United Kingdom went into 'lockdown' and life as we knew it changed. Suddenly, ethical clearance for my study was meaningless. My research felt meaningless. That said, at a time when more healthcare consultations are being conducted virtually than ever before in the NHS's history, perhaps my research around digital self-management has never been more important.

Under this global pandemic the whole planet is going through a period of adjustment and a shifting of the base line. The base line expectations of care, the base line of everything, has shifted. Our interactions with the institutions of the world has moved from face to face to online and with this shift comes a 'new normal'. Everything that was already more asynchronous and more distant 'pre-Covid' is potentially going to feel more normal, more acceptable 'post-Covid'. As a result, people might view digital self-management programs as more 'substantial' and, as a result, more acceptable than they did before.

So, will expectations of what self-management have changed after, say, 18 months of social distancing? Will patients more readily accept digital self-management? What journey have we gone on? And how do we deal with that? We might say we want to see someone in person but after a year of social distancing I wonder if we'll find the idea of being in close contact with a stranger to be quite scary? Will digitally distant treatment not only be the 'new norm', but the new preference? We are inevitably going to change and measuring this change will be important. So now more than ever, its time to be asking questions. I had better get back to it.