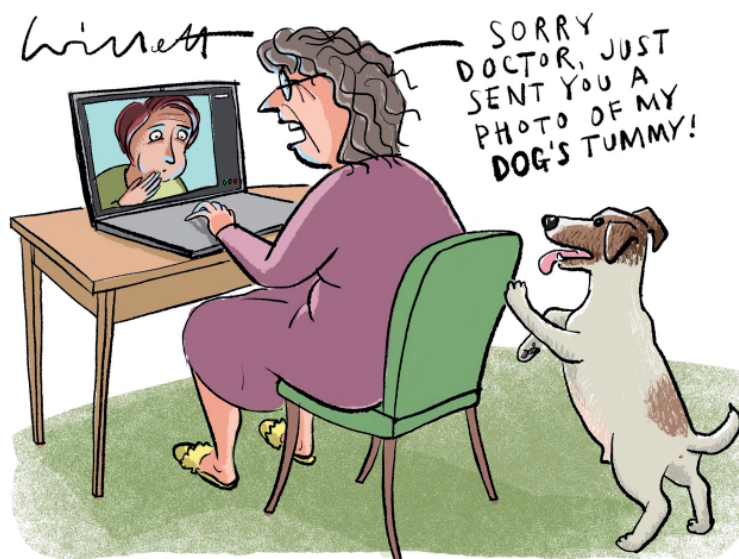


Can I store any images sent during remote consultations?

The covid-19 pandemic has led to many doctors using technology to avoid face-to-face consults. **Abi Rimmer** talks to experts about how best to protect yourself and your patient



Consider, carefully, if it's appropriate

Samuel Stone, standards policy officer at the General Medical Council

"Before requesting patient images, ask yourself: will it be possible or appropriate to assess the patient's condition remotely? If it won't, consider whether a face-to-face consultation is necessary, or signpost to other services where appropriate.

"If images are needed, you should seek informed consent by providing the patient with all the information they might want or need about why these are necessary and how the files will be kept secure.

"Make sure you're using clinically approved video consultation software, and secure arrangements for storing and transferring images. Guides can be found on the NHS Digital website and Attend Anywhere.

"Be particularly cautious when requesting and storing images of patients' intimate areas. Patients may need additional reassurance about how their images will be kept secure before providing their consent for storage and processing. It's also important to consider relevant laws regarding intimate images of adults, as well as safeguarding for vulnerable adults.

"If your patient is uncomfortable with sharing sensitive images, you could show them illustrative images of the suspected condition or ask them to describe their symptoms in detail.

"Ultimately, doctors should carefully think about when and how to use images, ensuring that they always protect patients and listen to their preferences."



Images need secure storage

Bernadette John, digital professionalism expert

"Prior to accepting images from patients during a remote consultation, it's essential that you discuss matters around transfer, storage, and use of these images so that informed consent can be gained and recorded.

"Clinical images form part of the medical record and therefore they need secure storage. For this reason, I wouldn't advocate using WhatsApp because images are downloaded to cloud storage by default and streamed between your other networked devices. If you must use WhatsApp, make sure you disable the cloud storage functionality. Clinicians should also note that deleted images on your smartphone are stored in the 'deleted images' album for the next 28 days. Don't just delete, be sure to empty the trash.

"You should also make sure that data encryption is enabled on your smartphone, operating systems are up to date, and default settings, such as global positioning satellite location information linked to photographs, are disabled. Bluetooth should not be used to transfer images between devices.

"Hospify, which has been approved by the NHS apps library, allows you to receive images from a patient securely. Currently this free app provides secure image availability on your smartphone for 30 days. From June, the new web app allowed doctors to store these images securely indefinitely. Video consulting will also be available on this app in the next few months."



Obtain documented consent

Louise Fearfield, clinical vice president of the British Association of Dermatologists

"Patients should be informed of the risks associated with sending any images over the internet—this constitutes a non-secure transfer, as images are not subject to information governance and data protection until they have been received by the healthcare professional.

"Once the image has been received, any onward data transfer and storage should meet the NHS data protection and information governance requirements of the healthcare organisation.

"It's important that the routine documented consent process should be undertaken verbally and documented with a message explaining consent (such as 'by sending these images you consent to them being held in your medical record') or by sending a written patient consent form for the patient to complete and return.

"In some circumstances, images are deleted based on clinical judgment or patient preference with documentation of verbal consent, and patients should be advised to retain the images.

"Ultimately, however, it's recommended that images are retained when they've been used to make clinical judgments on patient care. Standard secure pathways to transfer images should be resumed in preference to patient emails as covid-19 recovery progresses."

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