Why **health and wellbeing** is going digital

As a HR professional, the health and wellbeing of your employees is one of your biggest priorities.

Part of this is ensuring they have access to healthcare if and when they need it. But the world is changing and so too is healthcare.

To continue offering your people the best support and services, you must stay abreast of these changes - and at Irish Life Health, we want to help you. That's why we've created this short guide, where we'll look at the impact, the developments and the future of healthcare in the Covid world and beyond.

From telephone calls and virtual appointments, to digitised medical records and lifestyle advice, virtual healthcare really does have the potential to change the world both from a provider and from a patient perspective.

The overarching benefit to this digital transformation is efficiency. Digital healthcare is faster and simpler, giving people quick and easy access to the information and services they need, such as diagnosis, selfcare, lifestyle recommendations and referrals for further treatment.

In today's always-on digital world, it seems that waiting has become a thing of the past. People want rapid responses. In the context of a small neighbourhood GP clinic, this agility and speed is not possible.

But, when digital solutions are introduced (and placed into the patients' hands via a telephone app or phone number), this type of response is more than achievable – and that is why virtual healthcare is set to become the norm.

The global telemedicine market size is expected to grow by **23.5%** by 2026 to $185.6 billion.[1]

How Covid-19 accelerated the move to digital

In October 2020, 21% of the Irish population were using telemedicine - an increase from just 4% in March 2020.[2]

Of those who utilised these services, 68% used telephone consultations with the remaining 32% using video consultations.[3]

As with all things though, it's not enough to be offered an alternative, it has to be similar or better than the existing solution in order to cement its place as a viable option going forward.

In the case of virtual healthcare, it seems to have been welcomed with open arms. **80% of those who used telemedicine were either satisfied or very satisfied,** and a majority (55%) suggest that they are likely to use telemedicine more frequently in the future.[3]

David Jennings, Commercial Director at HealthHero, said that the Covid-19 pandemic had accelerated the digital transformation of the healthcare industry by as much as 5-10 years.
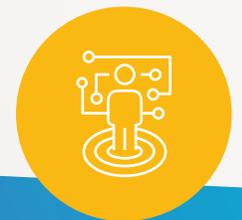
What services make up virtual healthcare?

Virtual healthcare is much more than just GP consultations – it covers prevention, diagnosis, treatment, monitoring and aftercare.

Split into two key objectives, virtual health needs to help prevent illness via the likes of risk prevention, monitoring, digital therapeutics, and healthy lifestyle advice.

In addition to this, the service must also help cure illness by **coordinating rapid action** among relevant stakeholders – such as offering consultant referrals and prescriptions sent straight to your pharmacy.

Using communication channels such as the telephone, video chats, emails, and instant messaging, patients are able to complete a variety of tasks across the entire healthcare spectrum – thereby **streamlining their experience**, minimising their in-person impact on primary care facilities (i.e., surgeries and hospitals) and enabling healthcare professionals achieve more with their time.

49% of people believe that being able to **track** symptoms or use monitoring devices to assess health concerns, was important and helpful during the pandemic.[4]

At its core, virtual health enables patients to "meet" with doctors, nurses, pharmacists, consultants and physiotherapists (to name but a few) without having to visit a surgery or even leave their homes or workplaces.

It removes the need to book time off work, arrange childcare, travel to various locations, and of course, wait for long periods of time for appointments or results.

Using the camera on a patient's smartphone, doctors can effectively identify and diagnose eye problems and even screen moles and skin disorders to determine the presence of cancer. It truly is a wonderous blend of medical knowledge and everyday technology.

In Australia, developers and medical professionals have developed a smartphone app called Resapp, which enables doctors to identify respiratory issues simply by listening to a patient cough into their phone.

In Africa, this blend of technology and knowledge is being used to triage patients in remote areas with medication being delivered by drone – virtual health is making the world a smaller (and some might say healthier) place.

Even without the presence of a doctor or medical professional, patients can digest large amounts of wellbeing and lifestyle information via apps that will help motivate them to live healthier lives.
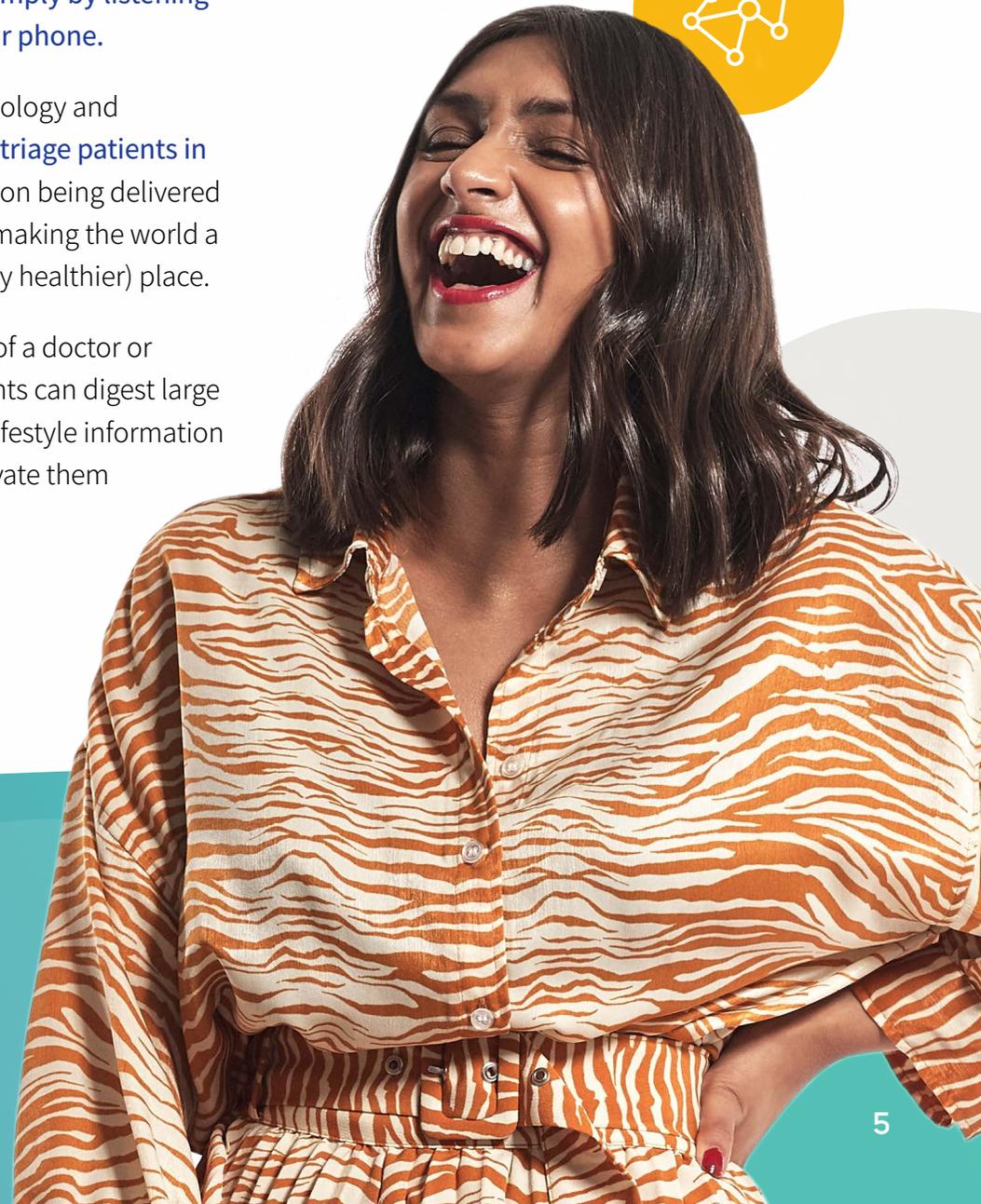
The long and short-term benefits of virtual health

As with most digital tools, ease and convenience are the obvious benefits, but there are plenty more when it comes to virtual health.

The first and most advantageous for everyone involved is earlier intervention. As opposed to waiting for a GP appointment or potentially leaving the issue unchecked altogether, patients can now consult with a medical professional quickly and efficiently – thereby minimising the time before treatment begins.

There's also the reduction in mental health issues such as anxiety that can occur alongside other medical issues. For example, trouble sleeping, tiredness and low mood, plus concerns about diagnosis can all be minimised with earlier engagement with a GP or nurse.

A recent study found that over 29.1 million consultations take place in Irish general practice every year.[5]

What's more, virtual care can dramatically reduce costs for patients. In fact, some health insurance providers are now offering unlimited virtual GP visits as part of their plans, removing a financial barrier that often prevents people from seeking help in the first place.

From the viewpoint of the healthcare industry, the digitisation of process and communication channels helps streamline the connection between primary and secondary care. For example, should a patient be referred to another service or require specialist treatment, the relevant documents and test results can be sent/shared almost immediately.

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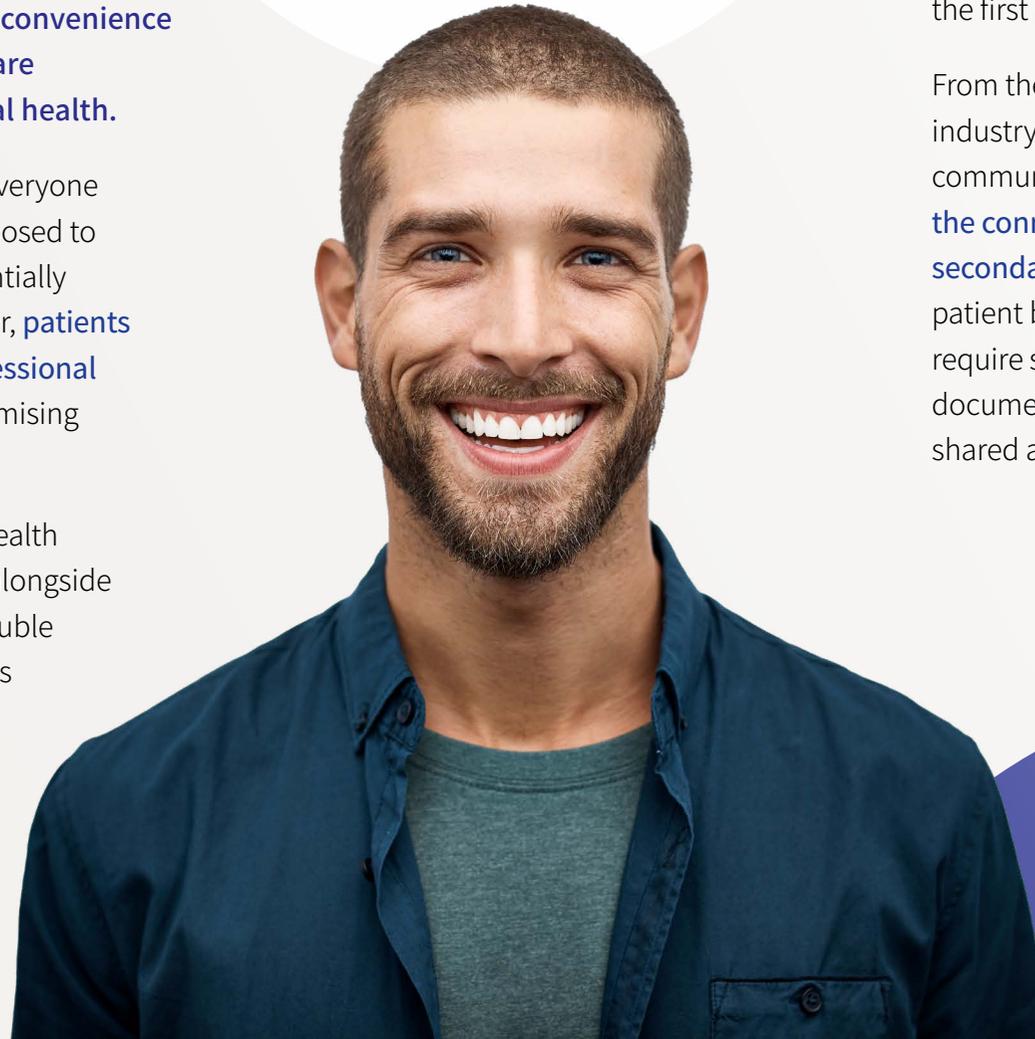
84% of the Irish public believe there should be a single digital view of healthcare records throughout the health system.[6]

What the future looks like for virtual health

Virtual health is here to stay. Over the past 18 months it has proved beyond doubt that its benefits outweigh any concerns and that it's a welcome solution for both patients and medical professionals.

As with all digital technologies though, it's likely to continue developing at a rapid pace. According to David Jennings, Commercial Director at HealthHero, over the next 5 years, we'll see the rise of 'Open Healthcare'.

Similar to open banking, this technical development will enable third-party developers to build applications and services around a core medical institution, using APIs that capture and file data in central databases i.e., medical records.

There are already products in development in the diabetic space where the patient wears a patch on their arm that connects to their phone and feeds data to their GP. The patch will highlight changes and variances in the patient's metrics and suggest they eat something or can even automatically release an insulin shot.

With home testing products such as pin pricks and digital blood testing kits that plug into a phone, it's possible to see digital results in real-time.

From advising medical treatments to highlighting areas of risk and the suitable lifestyle changes required, these apps and technical programs can carry out huge numbers of processes and procedures without the need for a medical professional.

This means doctors and nurses are free to focus on the more critical scenarios, while patients are able to self-serve and find a solution/treatment faster.

We visit you

At Irish Life Health, we understand just how much you care about your employees' health – and we know you're already doing a great job of providing for their needs – but we want to make all of your lives easier.

That's why we're committed to providing your employees with the best possible experience throughout all their interactions with us, from the day they become a member, right through to when they may need to make a claim.

Your employees can also access all their virtual healthcare needs via **MyClinic on the Irish Life Health app.** This includes unlimited 24/7 consultations with GPs, nurses and professionally-trained counsellors, as well as expert advice from physiotherapists, dieticians, plus much more*.

The experience we offer our customers through benefits such as MyClinic is one of the reasons we are the number one health insurer for customer experience in Ireland[8].

Research has found that two of the top reasons for using virtual healthcare are convenience and speed.[7]

To find out more about our health insurance plans and benefits such as MyClinic, speak to one of our experts today on

01-5625248 or visit **irishlifehealth.ie**

Sources:

[1,2,3,4] Behaviour & Attitudes, Medical Council Press Release

[5] Med-Tech Innovation | [6] BMC | [7] Ignite Data | [8] CXi Report 2020

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