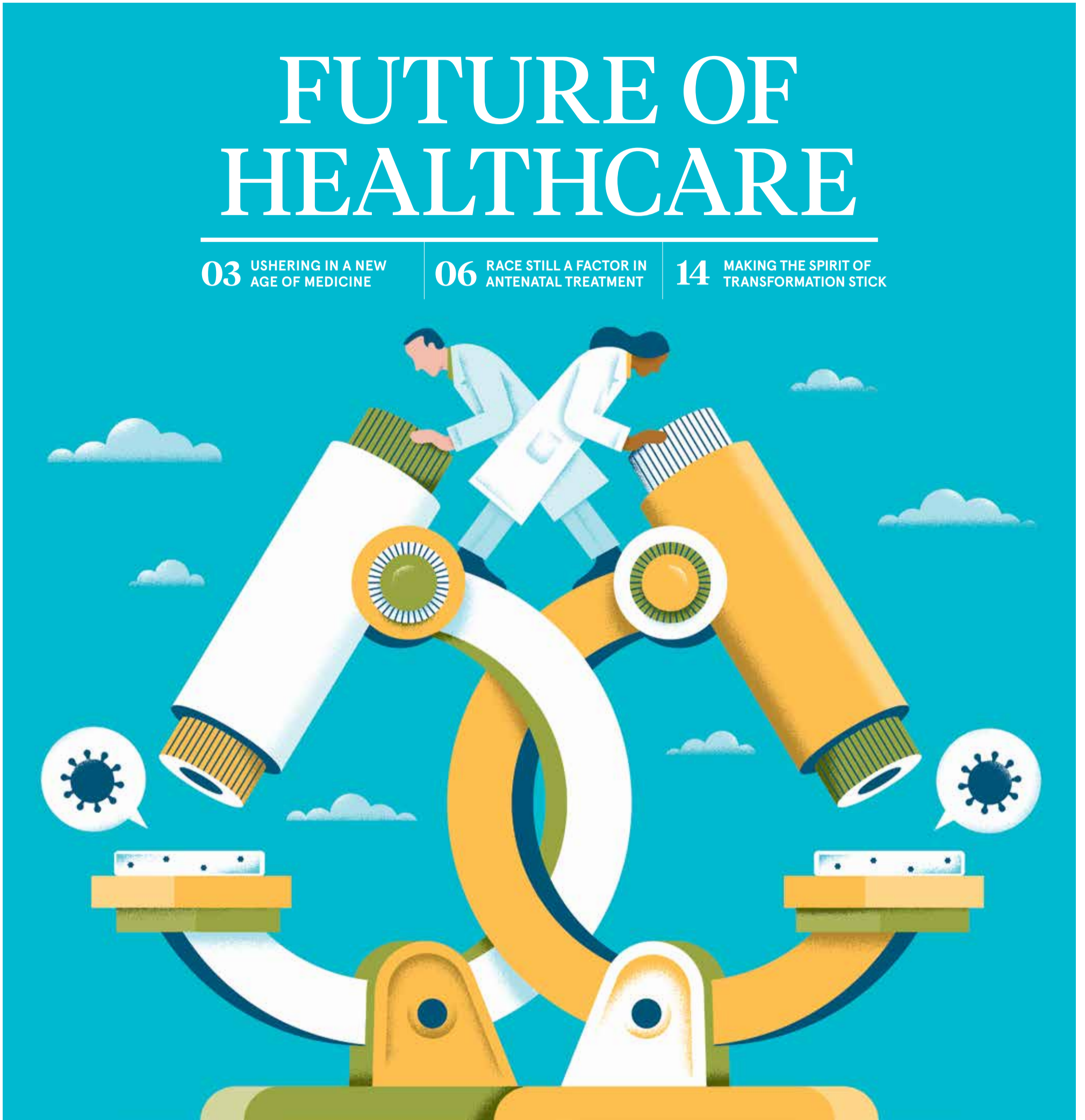


# FUTURE OF HEALTHCARE

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## TELEMEDICINE

# Virtual healthcare comes of age

Telehealth and home-monitoring services have surged in popularity during the coronavirus outbreak, which could prove to be a turning point in adoption across the world

Lucrezia Lozza

**A**fter years of hype and promises to revolutionise healthcare, digital health solutions have finally entered the mainstream, but it took a pandemic to be the catalyst.

Telehealth or virtual healthcare, which can range from simple emails, texts or video chats with health professionals, to devices and apps that share patient data in real time with doctors and nurses, have surged in popularity over recent months.

Government-mandated lockdowns, social-distancing measures and fears

of going to hospital or visiting doctors during the pandemic have prompted people to use telehealth solutions, both for minor ailments and more chronic conditions. According to the *STADA Health Report*, across Europe, those in favour of digital health solutions, such as consultations over webcam, rose from 54 per cent in 2019 to 70 per cent in 2020.

Meanwhile, in the United States, 57 per cent of healthcare providers now view telehealth more favourably than they did before the COVID-19 outbreak, according to



McKinsey. In fact, the consulting firm estimates that, because of the acceleration of consumer and provider adoption of telehealth services beyond simply urgent care, the US virtual care market alone could be worth some \$250 billion, compared to annual US telehealth revenues of \$3 billion in 2019.

A few days into lockdown, Geneva-based medical appointment platform OneDoc launched a video telehealth service alongside its traditional booking platform as physical appointments started to decrease. Like many other healthcare professionals who have used the OneDoc platform, Dr Arabelle Rieder, a GP who specialises in addiction, was pleasantly surprised by the positive health outcomes that telemedicine has offered.

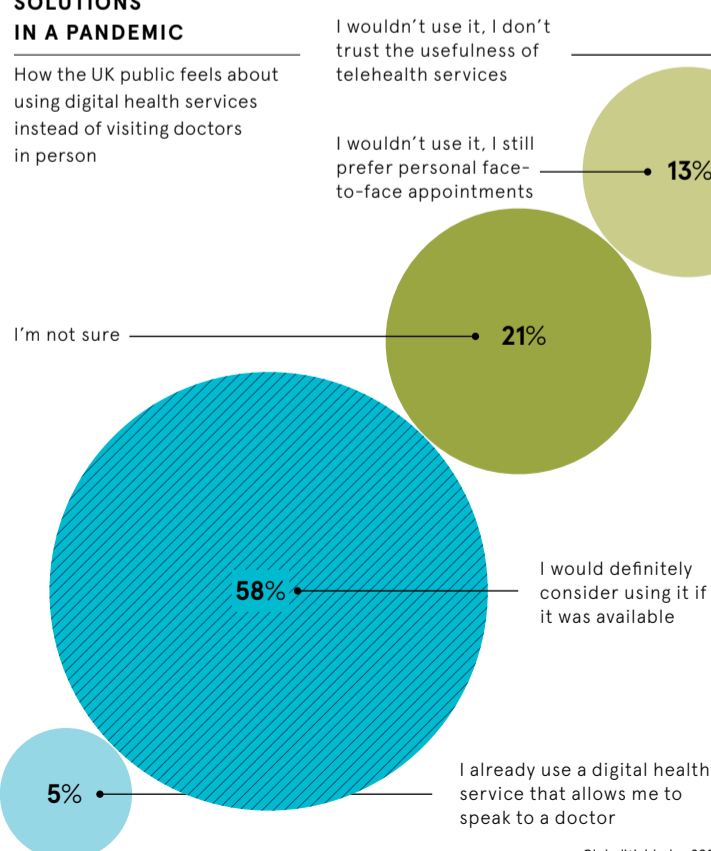
Virtual care, she says, is an excellent method for follow-ups, examination assessments or triage for minor conditions, especially for those living in isolated locations. She also explains how useful it is to carry out check-ups on patients with chronic diseases or addiction, and avoid any unnecessary physical contact. "When the diagnosis wasn't clear, and I needed more information, they would come to the practice," she adds.

Digital health solutions can also dramatically improve care and support for patients with mental health conditions. For them, the continuity of the treatment amid such a disruptive period is vital.

In Italy, Centro Medico Santagostino, a healthcare network of specialist clinics with more than 1,000 doctors working across various specialisations, has transferred

## USING DIGITAL HEALTH SOLUTIONS IN A PANDEMIC

How the UK public feels about using digital health services instead of visiting doctors in person



GlobalWebIndex 2020





Geba86/Getty Images



**Despite some initial scepticism, 50 per cent of patients don't want to go back to face-to-face appointments**

citizens can choose between a traditional GP or telehealth solutions. But other countries still have a long way to go.

“Even today, only a handful of countries in Europe have well-determined regulation for telehealth visits and include them in public reimbursement schemes,” says Maria Shivkova, consultant at Research2Guidance, a digital health market analyst company.

Data privacy is also a major challenge when it comes to public buy-in of telehealth services, with patients keen to know that their video chats and clinical information are safely stored. A 2018 survey by Deloitte found that one third of US physicians cited data security as a top challenge of using virtual care technologies.

OneDoc, for example, doesn't use public technologies to communicate with patients, but relies on its own encrypted video services built in-house. “Suffering a data breach would be detrimental for our company,” says OneDoc founder Arthur Germain.

Yet, with a more regulated market, fears of digitalisation are dissipating, says Oxford's Velardo. “It is important to establish a culture of care for the data that the company handles and an attention to adherence to already existing guidelines and laws,” he says.

Age has been a major factor inhibiting the overall growth of virtual care up until now, with older generations hesitant about using mobile devices to access their GP. But in Switzerland, where telehealth has been an integral part of the healthcare system for many years, there are few demographic differences. Medgate, for example, has patients of all ages with varied conditions and some telehealth solutions are even built specifically for geriatric patients.

“It is, however, important we don't forget that designing principles will certainly differ for two generations,” says Velardo. “So an older group will require attention to details and a design approach different from that used to reach the large portion of users of new technologies.”

Although telehealth could never be a substitute for traditional medicine, it can be an additional tool to aid the productivity and efficiency of doctors, and help patients receive more consistent treatment, especially during a pandemic when physical contact must be kept to a minimum and social distancing maintained, for the time being at least. ●

90 per cent of its psychotherapy online since the pandemic hit. “Despite some initial scepticism from therapists, 50 per cent of patients don't want to go back to face-to-face appointments,” says Andrea Porcu, managing director of the network.

Telehealth could also be an asset for chronic diseases and geriatric healthcare, as well as facilitating check-ups for people with mobility issues.

At the San Giovanni hospital in Rome, daily care continues even after patients are discharged. The hospital gives each patient a briefcase containing a smartphone, an ECG device and a glucometer, that is able to communicate with hospital staff, and doctors can check the wellbeing of the patient in real time and act in a timely manner.

“Telemedicine has already been proven effective in chronic disease management, in many cases showing improvements when compared with standard care,” says Dr Carmelo Velardo, senior researcher in digital health at the University of Oxford's Institute of Biomedical Engineering.

A randomised controlled trial conducted by Oxford University compared the efficacy of a mobile phone-based blood glucose management system with standard clinical care in women with gestational diabetes, a type of diabetes that can occur during pregnancy. Through the system, midwives could provide almost real-time feedback by way of drug adjustments and advice on lifestyle changes.

The study found that the intervention group, who had more frequent blood glucose monitoring, had fewer C-sections and lower rates of preterm birth. “These have proved extremely effective in lowering several potential complications that may present later during the pregnancy and

that might have potential long-term effects on the health of women and their babies,” says Velardo, who worked on the study. “By providing a longitudinal and comprehensive set of data, those patients could see greater benefits when the data is used to personalise disease management and treatment.”

Engagement and empowerment of patients are also key factors in the success and adoption of telehealth services. In the Oxford University study, for example, the intervention group reported a higher satisfaction of care throughout their pregnancies.

Meanwhile, when Ines Iacovella had a minor health issue during the pandemic, she picked up her smartphone and started a video call with her doctor. Immediately after the doctor confirmed her diagnosis, the prescription was ready at the local pharmacy.

“During lockdown, when going by train to the city was impossible, telemedicine greatly helped me,” says Iacovella, who lives in a remote Italian village. “Telemedicine is a game-changer when office hours don't match with the doctor's opening times or when you need advice on laboratory exam results.”

In Switzerland, Basel-based Medgate, the largest telemedicine centre in Europe run by doctors, has been providing telehealth services since 2000, but now runs video appointments with doctors via the Medgate mobile app. During the peak of the lockdown, the company experienced a 20 per cent increase in its services.

But telehealth adoption is highly dependent on different countries' regulatory frameworks. In Switzerland's case, healthcare is provided through mandatory private health insurance, whereby

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