



**Health
Information
and Quality
Authority**

An tÚdarás Um Fhaisnéis
agus Cáilíocht Sláinte

Health technology assessment of teledermatology to support the management of primary care referrals: plain language summary

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The Health Information and Quality Authority (HIQA) is an independent statutory body established to promote safety and quality in the provision of health and social care services for the benefit of the health and welfare of the public.

Reporting to the Minister for Health and engaging with relevant government Ministers and departments, HIQA has responsibility for the following:

- **Setting standards for health and social care services** — Developing person-centred standards and guidance, based on evidence and international best practice, for health and social care services in Ireland.
- **Regulating social care services** — The Chief Inspector of Social Services within HIQA is responsible for registering and inspecting residential services for older people and people with a disability, and children’s special care units.
- **Regulating health services** — Regulating medical exposure to ionising radiation.
- **Monitoring services** — Monitoring the safety and quality of permanent international protection accommodation service centres, health services and children’s social services against the national standards. Where necessary, HIQA investigates serious concerns about the health and welfare of people who use health services and children’s social services.
- **Health technology assessment** — Evaluating the clinical and cost effectiveness of health programmes, policies, medicines, medical equipment, diagnostic and surgical techniques, health promotion and protection activities, and providing advice to enable the best use of resources and the best outcomes for people who use our health service.
- **Health information** — Advising on the efficient and secure collection and sharing of health information, setting standards, evaluating information resources and publishing information on the delivery and performance of Ireland’s health and social care services.
- **National Care Experience Programme** — Carrying out national service-user experience surveys across a range of health and social care services, with the Department of Health and the HSE.

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Plain language summary

What did we look at?

A dermatologist is a doctor who diagnoses and treats skin conditions. We looked at whether it would help if a GP included photos when sending a referral letter for their patient to a dermatologist. The dermatologist would use the photos alongside the referral letter to help decide how urgently they need to see the patient. In some cases, the dermatologist might not need to see the patient in person. Instead, when it is safe to do so, they could provide advice to their GP on how to manage the patient's condition.

What challenges does dermatology care currently face?

There has been a rise in demand for hospital dermatology care in Ireland. There are many reasons for this, including Ireland's population getting older, an increase in the number of people getting skin cancer, and new treatments to manage skin conditions. Skin conditions can cause a lot of different symptoms and can have a significant physical, psychological and economic impact on patients and their carers.

In 2024, nearly 100,000 people were referred to hospital dermatology services in Ireland. This number is expected to increase each year. However, there are not enough dermatologists to see everyone, which has caused long waiting lists and delays in getting appointments. Waiting times are long for all patients, but appointments are mostly allocated to patients who need to be seen more urgently. This means that patients who need a less urgent appointment may have to wait up to three years. The HSE target is for these patients to be seen within 26 weeks. Delays in accessing care increases the impact on patients and their carers.

What did we find?

We found that in the context of an overall care pathway where a dermatologist always has the option to see a patient in person if they need to, teledermatology is a safe and effective way to help manage referrals to dermatologists. With teledermatology, some patients do not need to be seen in-person, or can be safely treated by their GP with advice from a dermatologist. That means these patients will have faster access to expert advice to help manage their condition. Using teledermatology will mean fewer patients need to have in-person appointments. This means that patients who the dermatologist wants to see in person will have shorter wait times. With some simple changes, teledermatology can easily be added to the existing electronic referral system used by GPs. The estimated additional cost to the Health Service Executive is around €2.7 million over 10 years. It is important to know that teledermatology alone cannot meet the growing demand for dermatology services. More dermatologists are also needed to reduce waiting times.

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