

Meet Consultant Connect, the platform connecting GPs and consultants to reduce patient waiting times

As part of our quick fire questions series – or QFQs – we spoke to Jonathan Patrick, the CEO of Consultant Connect about connection, customer support, acquisition and scaling telemedicine internationally.

In late 2014, Scott Welpton (our CFO) and I were working with some groups of GPs to help them form Federations. As part of that, we attended quite a few workshops and heard a lot about the frustrations GPs and other clinicians faced when trying to get in touch with hospital colleagues.

I bumped into Roger Tweedale (our Chief Clinical Engagement Officer) at one of these events – he had been involved in a small project where GPs had been given immediate phone access to a team of NHS cardiologists, and the results were amazing!

The service was so reliable that the GP would phone whilst their patient was with them. As a result of the consultant's input, many of the patients were treated then and there without having to go to the hospital, meaning they got the care they needed immediately and the NHS "saved" an unnecessary referral. Roger believed that it was the tip of the iceberg, so we put a team

together to see if we could make it work at scale across large areas and multiple medical specialties.

Seven years later, we are now dealing with hundreds of thousands of advice requests per year across most specialties, and our service covers more than half of the NHS.

Tell me about the business – what it is, what it aims to achieve, who you work with, how you reach customers and so on?

We're in the business of making sure *patients get the right care first time*. We do this by connecting clinicians who are not sure what to do with their patients with experts who can help them make decisions.

For example, the most common use of our platform remains GPs using either our phone or photo-messaging service to get immediate advice from cardiologists, dermatologists, haematologists and so on. On average, two-thirds of patients avoid an unnecessary wait for a hospital appointment after a GP has sought advice from a consultant.

Our second largest activity is providing advice to paramedics who decide whether or not to take a patient to the hospital. Again, the results are spectacular, with around half of all advice episodes concluding with the patient avoiding an unneeded hospital trip.

In the early days, it tended to be commissioners who bought our service, but these days we have contracts with all sorts of providers and government bodies. Our biggest project covers the whole of Wales and is commissioned directly by the Welsh Government.

How has the business evolved since its launch? When was this?

The business officially launched in March 2015, and our first project offered GPs in North East Essex phone access to four local elective specialties at Colchester Hospital. Since then, we have grown to cover most elective, urgent care and mental health specialties and expanded into messaging and email advice.

Perhaps the biggest evolution was the launch of our National Consultant Network four years ago – this makes it possible for clinicians in one part of the country to speak with specialists from other geographic areas, which is super-handy for areas that have a shortage of specialists in, for example, neurology and dermatology. This network of NHS consultants is now also evolving, enabling the Consultant Connect platform to offer referral triage and first outpatient appointments, which have a massive impact on waiting lists.

How are you funded?

We raised a small amount of money through friends & family at the beginning but we've been funded organically since then.

What has been your biggest challenge so far, and how have you overcome this?

In January last year, we were acquired by Teladoc, the world leader in Virtual Care. As well as giving us access to cutting edge technology, the deal has meant we can look at introducing Consultant Connect in other countries.

The acquisition has been extremely successful – as well as growing our core business with the NHS, we have also been able to introduce telemedicine “robots” into the NHS. For example, in University Hospitals Leicester, consultants are able to be physically present in one hospital site whilst doing ward rounds virtually at another site.

It's been a great experience – but it's been extraordinarily hard work to become part of another organisation and allow Consultant Connect to continue growing and innovating. We've got through it

all by being disciplined and sticking to the basics. It's been helped enormously by the enthusiasm and unswerving faith of our amazing new colleagues in Brighton and Barcelona!

How does Consultant Connect answer an unmet need?

I think our secret sauce is customer support. The technology that we use is brilliant – that's a given – but great technology doesn't mean widespread adoption and a return on your investment. As a result, we have one measure of

success at Consultant Connect, and that is how much the platform is being used.

More than half of my colleagues are focused on working directly with local health systems to solve local communication problems and then helping get the news out to users. The result is that clinicians use our system, patients get better care, and buyers get value for money.

What's in store for the future?

We believe we will see a lot more focus on mental health in the coming years. For example, we have just started rolling out Teladoc's myStrength Mental Health app in South Yorkshire, and it's already proving popular with the public. The service offers eCBT for mild anxiety and depression; all backed up by a team of UK-based psychologists. The result is an extremely accessible patient experience and good value care for patients, so I'm expecting South Yorkshire's forward-thinking approach will be adopted more widely in the NHS.

What one piece of advice would you give to other founders or future founders?

Don't do stuff for free! For anyone who is selling into the NHS, the temptation to give something away for free rather than waiting ages for various financial approvals is overwhelming! But don't be tempted. You need to know that customers will be willing to pay for what you do or you'll never have a sustainable business. So focus the conversation on value for money and return on investment, and don't do stuff for free!

Jonathan Patrick is the CEO of [Consultant Connect](#).