

Digital Empathy: Role of Empathy in Digital Health Interactions– Executive Summary

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Digital Empathy is an Experience Labs project, which employed participatory design methods to investigate the role of empathy within the emergent and future models of digital healthcare services, such as Video Conferencing (VC) consultations. The project had a particular focus on delivering care for people living with long-term conditions, for example, diabetes.

A number of factors have an impact on empathy, such as patient pre-conceptions and other individual characteristics, the corresponding behaviours and beliefs of the clinician, and the setting of the consultation. The aim of the Experience Labs was to explore whether people's perception of empathy changes in a digital context, and to identify factors that are deemed important to empathic VC consultation.

The project was proposed by the University of the Highlands and Islands (UHI), and was accepted by the Digital Health & Care Institute as Experience Labs. Two Experience Labs were held across three locations in the North of Scotland between February and June 2016.

Pre-Lab observations were carried out in three sites with VC clinics in the Highlands at the start of the project, in order to gain experience of the VC clinic settings and factors that contribute to an empathic experience.

Experience Lab 1 was organised in two locations, with the aim to explore what empathy means for different individuals. The sessions were designed to gather stories of personal experiences of using healthcare services, in order to create a shared understanding of empathy and what 'digital empathy' might mean in the context of VC consultations. Design tools such as stories boards and a process map were used to capture insights from the session.

In Experience Lab 2, the focus was on ways of delivering digital services in future scenarios in order to create a more empathic experience in VC consultations for diabetes care. Design props, and an iterated version of the process map, were used to explore future scenarios.

The findings from the Labs highlight key factors such as access to shared and meaningful data; clear verbal communication; providing choice of preferred pathways for continued care; presence of the diabetic nurse; preparation and access to information before consultation; and a summary to take away afterwards, as some of the key factors that have an impact on empathic VC consultation.