

# Queensland eConsultant Partnership Program

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QUEENSLAND

An Australian Government Initiative

*The University of Queensland – Mater Research Institute (UQ–MRI) and Mater Adults Hospital, Brisbane.*

## What is the Queensland eConsultant Program?

A model that provides GPs with access to specialist input about care for adult patients with complex chronic conditions within 72 hours. The eConsultant Program provides support for GPs and patients when they reach a point in care where input from a specialist regarding cardiac, respiratory, diabetes, thyroid, ophthalmology, dermatology, endocrinology or general medical management is required. Currently such patients are referred by GPs to outpatient departments where patients can experience long wait times.

**Background:** International evidence from the Mayo Clinic and the University of California San Francisco (USCF) suggests increased efficiency, quality and satisfaction with care, by allowing GPs secure electronic access to specialist input, and avoiding unnecessary Outpatient Departments (OPD) attendance. The University of Queensland-Mater Research Institute (UQ-MRI) and the Mater Adults Hospital Brisbane have created an asynchronous secure electronic request for advice system that will link GPs with a specialist at the Mater Adult Hospital Brisbane.

### The initiative offers the following opportunities:

- To support adult Queenslanders who may otherwise experience limited access to timely specialist services.
- To evaluate the impact of an evidence-based initiative applied in a local setting.

- To participate in an evaluation of a model of care that aligns with future models of health care delivery and funding.

### How does the eConsultant model of care work?

GPs complete a request for advice (RFA) template (like a referral template) to send a specific question about the next steps in care to a specialist based at the Mater Adult Hospital Brisbane. The question is sent via secure messaging using Medical Objects and must include a clinical summary. Some required fields will be auto completed from the general practice's clinical information system (e.g. Medical Director, Best Practice).

The Mater based specialist responds to this request within 72 hours, using Medical Objects secure messaging with the following care options:

- An answer to the problem
- A request for further information or a phone consultation with the GP
- A request to refer the patient for a conventional face-to-face OPD appointment.

GPs will advise eConsultant patients to schedule a timely follow-up appointment to discuss the specialist's advice typically received from the specialist within 72 hours.

General medicine eConsultant replies are led by Dr Narelle Fagermo – a physician who has been involved in the design of this process and is enthusiastic regarding its utility. Professor David McIntyre leads the endocrinology eConsultant service and Dr. Jim Muir in dermatology. *Read more about these consultants on our eConsultant webpage.*

All treatment decisions will be made as per usual by the GP together with the patient including the option for specialist input via eConsultant. If the GP concludes that a RFA via eConsultant does not meet the clinical needs of the patient, the GP will generate a usual care specialist referral.

Patients can also choose to be referred directly to a specialist for a visit if they prefer. In addition, if on receiving a RFA the eConsultant determines that an eConsultant will not meet the clinical needs of the patient, they also can request the GP generate a usual care specialist outpatient referral.

The service is free to General Practitioners. The time allocated by the eConsultant Specialist is funded through this evaluation.

### **Which patients are eligible to participate?**

**Patients aged 18 years or over who are:**

- assessed by their GP as requiring referral for specialist input (i.e. meet Queensland Health category 1-3 referral criteria); for internal medicine sub-specialties (excluding dermatology); and where
- a specialist could address the question based on referral information and without a face-to-face consultation.

*Individual patient consent to participate is not being sought because the decision to use the eConsultant pathway of care will be a decision made by the GP together with the patient.*

### **What is the role of practice staff?**

- GPs will advise eConsultant patients to schedule a timely follow-up appointment to discuss the specialist's advice (within one week or as clinically)
- GPs will monitor the secure messaging to ensure all requests for information are met.
- GPs or the practice manager will complete the short de-identified data collection sheet for each patient for whom an eConsultant referral is generated.

- GPs will have the option to give feedback on the advice received via a brief online (Qualtrics), anonymous close-out survey which will be accessed from a link provided in the physician response to the GP.
- Pending consent, a phone interview with GPs and Practice Manager to assess the impact of the eConsultant Program may be conducted.

### **Evaluation data and privacy**

De-identified data will include patient demographics, health profile (e.g. comorbidities); the e-referral question type, specialist response, GP action following response, exchange timeframe and outcome. The completed sheets will be sent back to a member of UQ-MRI research team. All data collected for the evaluation are strictly confidential and will be stored securely in a de-identified format. The de-identified findings will be analysed and disseminated in the usual manner, i.e. medical journals and conference presentations.

### **Ethical Clearance**

Ethical clearance has been granted by the Human Research Ethics Committee of The Darling Downs Hospital and Health Service in accordance with the guidelines of the National Health and Medical Research Council (HREC Reference number: HREA/2020/QTDD/68249). If you would like to speak to an independent officer about any ethical issues please contact the DDHHS Ethics Officer on (07) 4616 6696.

### **For further information**

[Visit the QLD eConsultant Partnership program website](#)

or

To participate in the eConsultant service please contact Dr Jenny Job: [j.job@mater.uq.edu.au](mailto:j.job@mater.uq.edu.au)