

Digital doctors are a poor substitute for family doctors

Your article *Sorry Matt Hancock, but online GPs are no replacement for the real thing* (31 March) is yet another warning of the ever-greater losses of the best qualities of erstwhile NHS general practice. For decades this drew largely from senses of community and vocation: personal understandings and relationships that grew from recurrent direct encounters and easier accessibility, often over long periods. The resulting personal–professional networks made possible the subtler art and humanity of medical practice that lies beyond mere procedures of treatment: how best to guide, comfort, support, encourage, express... When to treat and when to heal.

Matt Hancock and his advisers may understand some of the impressive possibilities of impersonally delivered medical science, but they seem ignorant of its limitations. Treatment and care can be very different. Consider the following: problems of maturation and development, stress-related and psychosomatic syndromes, all mental health, chronic (incurable) illnesses, ageing and degenerative processes, palliative and terminal care – in all of these, diagnostic judgement and therapeutic influence are likely to be much more accurate through personal knowledge and contact than via a remote digital channel with an unknown professional.

Relationships involve far more than transactions. The neglect of this principle is a major factor in our general practice staffing crisis.

Dr David Zigmond, Executive Committee, Doctors for the NHS