

Researchers fast-track app for bowel disease sufferers in new COVID-19 era

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The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in University of Otago researchers, in collaboration with others in New Zealand, fast-tracking development of a smartphone application (app) to help improve care for people with Crohn's disease and ulcerative colitis (also called inflammatory bowel disease or IBD), as fewer of them will be able to meet with specialists.

With the help of Crohn's and Colitis NZ Charitable Trust, a charity organization supporting people with IBD in New Zealand and IT company Stratos Technology Partners, the app is being launched nationally this month with significant interest from both patients and healthcare providers. Interested people need to contact their specialist or IBD nurse to get the app.

IBDsmart, an app for symptom monitoring for patients with IBD has been developed by a team of researchers led by Head of the Department of Medicine and Gastroenterologist, Professor Michael Schultz.

A nationwide trial involving 100 patients compared those using IBDsmart with those seen in person by

a specialist. After one year, there was no difference in health outcomes. These results were recently published in the international science journal *Inflammatory Bowel Diseases*.

Professor Schultz explains there are more than 20,000 patients with IBD in New Zealand with numbers increasing about 5.6 percent annually.

"COVID-19 doesn't allow us to see patients in person as most of our patients belong to the group classified as vulnerable due to their immunosuppressive medications.

"IBDsmart would provide an ideal platform to support telephone consultations. In case of a flare-up, healthcare providers would know in an instant what the problems are due to the answers given and submitted through the app, but also through the free-text option."

Similar for regular monitoring, the app would ensure that patients with problems can be separated from patients with no problems and these patients given priority for an outpatient appointment.

Crohn's and Colitis NZ's chairperson Dr. Richard Stein says his organization strongly supports the initiative. Crohn's disease and [ulcerative colitis](#) are life-long diseases that cause diarrhea, extreme urgency and abdominal pain. While many people with IBD are stable on medication, flare-ups are common and often unpredictable, he explains.

"Flares that go unchecked frequently result in emergency room visits, hospitalizations and surgeries, all of which can often be avoided with timely intervention.

"In the current COVID-19 climate, many people are scared to go to their supermarket, much less go to the hospital for an appointment. Compounding the problem are long waiting lists for appointments and

a critical shortage of gastroenterologists.

"IBDsmart will circumvent many of these issues. Patients who become unwell will have immediate access to their specialist, in time for their [disease](#) to be managed before more aggressive intervention will be needed. They will not need to schedule and wait, sometimes weeks, before getting appointment."

The organization has been seeking [financial support](#) to roll out IBDsmart nationally at no cost to the public.

More information: Andrew McCombie et al. A Noninferiority Randomized Clinical Trial of the Use of the Smartphone-Based Health Applications IBDsmart and IBDoc in the Care of Inflammatory Bowel Disease Patients, *Inflammatory Bowel Diseases* (2019). [DOI: 10.1093/ibd/izz252](#)

Provided by University of Otago

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