

## Conditions exist for online primary healthcare services without compromising patient safety

Online primary healthcare services have become increasingly common over the past few years. More and more people receive care through these services, both from private and public actors. The Swedish Health and Social Care Inspectorate, IVO, has inspected 13 care providers that offer online primary healthcare. The review indicates that the care providers do consider the specific conditions and the associated risks when providing healthcare online. This means that conditions exist for providing this care without compromising patient safety. IVO has also observed that patients are referred to physical care providers when necessary and that the prescription of medications follows existing guidelines in most cases.

### Patient safety is to be assured, regardless of how the patients interact with care providers

All patients are entitled to safe healthcare, regardless of whether they meet the healthcare staff in person or through online services. In order to provide healthcare that is safe for the patient, the care provider needs to consider the specific conditions and risks associated with their activities. For online healthcare services, this means that the care provider must identify and manage risks associated with the patient being provided care online and the clinicians often working remotely.

But how do the care providers ensure patient safety in the online care?

IVO has inspected 13 care providers that offer online primary healthcare. Seven of these are private providers, while six are public providers.

The purpose of this supervision has been to review how these care providers see to the specific conditions and ensure patient safety when providing online healthcare. The purpose has also been to offer guidance in their patient safety efforts, which IVO has done over the course of the inspections.

#### IVO's inspection

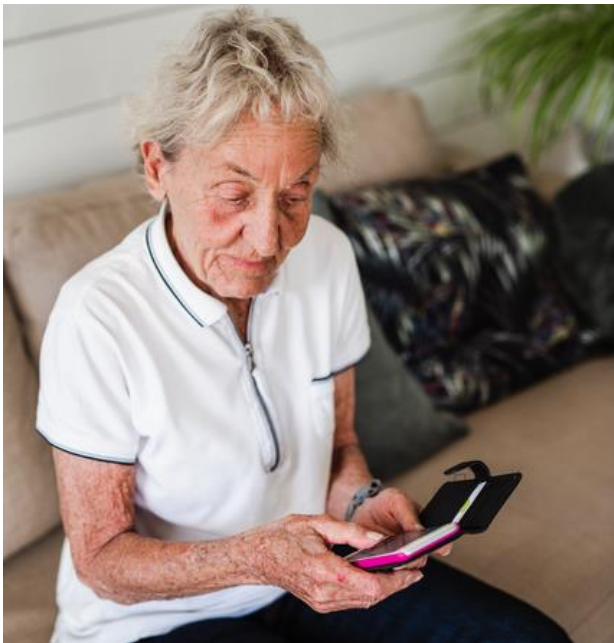
- Review of the care providers' patient safety accounts, healthcare deviations and information security policy
- Review of 446 medical records
- Inspections through interviews with management and staff
- Analysis of how the care providers prescribe medications based on data from the Swedish eHealth Agency
- Interviews with 35 patients who has received healthcare from the care providers
- Survey sent to all regions regarding online healthcare services.

#### Care providers included in IVO's inspection

Care provider	Online service
Aleris X	Doktor24
Capio Go AB	Capio Go
Doktorse Nordic AB	doktor.se
Knodd Medicare AB	Knodd.se
MD International	Min Doktor
Medicheck AB	MediCheck
Region Dalarna	Min vård
Region Jönköpings län	Bra Liv nära
Region Stockholm	Alltid Öppet, SLSO
Region Östergötland	Digitala vårdcentralen
Remisshjälpen Sverige AB	Remisshjälpen
Vårdbolaget Tiohundra	Vård online
Västra Götalandsregionen	Närhälsan Online

## Patients are referred to physical care if needed

Care provided through online services differs from traditional healthcare involving a physical meeting. As such, the care provider needs to establish which illnesses can be handled through remote contact while still maintaining patient safety. The care provider also needs to consider which additional support structures and routines are required in order to provide remote healthcare. This may, for example, involve how the staff should act if the patient's condition deteriorates rapidly during an ongoing digital interaction.



Based on reviews of medical records, it is IVO's assessment that the healthcare has, in the vast majority of cases, been provided in accordance with scientific guidelines and proven experience. In most cases, the medical consultation was sought for minor ailments, often resulting in a recommendation only. Most patients were recommended to seek physical care when deemed necessary. In the few instances where IVO assessed that the healthcare provided was not in accordance with scientific guidelines and proven experience, this mostly concerned the prescription of medications.

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<sup>1</sup> *Strama – the Swedish strategic programme against antibiotic resistance*

## Prescription of medications largely adheres to established guidelines

When providing online healthcare, there is an inherent risk of incorrectly prescribing addictive medications. This is because doctors can encounter patients who they have no personal knowledge of and who may have received medications from another prescriber. When prescribing antibiotics, there is a risk that the antibiotics are prescribed in violation of established guidelines as there are certain examinations which cannot be performed online.

Medication was prescribed in 122 of the 446 medical records reviewed. IVO found that the vast majority of the prescriptions adhered to the established guidelines. On the issue of prescribing antibiotics, the recommendations made by Strama<sup>1</sup> were followed to a large extent, and it was very rare to find prescriptions for addictive medications. The majority of the care providers also routinely checked which medications had been prescribed to the patient in the past before issuing a new prescription.

IVO did however find that, in the case of one care provider in particular, the prescription of antibiotics did not adhere to the Strama recommendations for online healthcare. The same care provider also prescribed addictive medication without proper consideration or clear justification in the medical record. The care provider told IVO that they were unaware of this prescription. IVO therefore finds that the care provider needs to improve its control procedures.

## Specific training is required for online healthcare

The staff who interact with patients through online services need training and an introduction that are specific to this platform. Important elements of this training are how the technology should be managed and how to maintain high information security, such as when staff are working remotely and interacting with patients via chat or video calls. The staff also need training in the symptoms that can be dealt with over a digital medium, how to act in emergencies

and in cases when they suspect that a child is being harmed and a notification of concern needs to be filed.

In IVO's assessment, three of the inspected care providers need to improve and adapt their training and introduction with a focus on the factors unique to online healthcare.

## Self monitoring of prescription can be improved

Care providers need to monitor the care being given through better internal controls in order to ensure patient safety and to continue to improve their service. The care providers inspected by IVO and which specialise in providing online healthcare had a well-developed monitoring system. Some of them could for example quickly identify if prescriptions was not according to guidelines, allowing them to follow up on this issue immediately. IVO did however observe that the monitoring process at two of the care providers was inadequate. As such, it was found that they need to improve their self monitoring.

All care providers whose activity is based on physical healthcare did not have the capacity to monitor prescriptions through their online healthcare service. For example, two care providers lacked the technological ability to monitor prescriptions because their online healthcare service could not be separated from their other healthcare activities.

## Policy for information security is in place

Information security is important for patients to feel confident that online healthcare is being provided in a confidential manner and that the healthcare staff have access to correct information about the patient, such as medical records.

All the care providers inspected have an information security policy in place, which is a basis for conducting systematic information security work. All the care providers also had designated employees who work with and are responsible for information security matters.

## The regions are developing their own online healthcare services

Many regions are introducing services that allow

people to get in contact with care providers online, such as via chat and video calls. This emerged through the survey that IVO sent to all regions as part of the supervision. Several regions indicate that they need to meet the public's demand, that the population wants easier access to healthcare and that the healthcare resources will be used in a more efficient manner.

## Development towards combined online and physical healthcare

In the future, online and physical healthcare will become increasingly combined. Many private care providers, that previously only offered online healthcare services, are now collaborating with pharmacies or have their own health centres, or have agreements with health centres where they can refer their patients when giving samples etc. It is likely that patients will soon be interacting with their care providers both physically and online, but at different stages in the progression of an ailment.

Another development is that several regions are in the process of implementing other solutions in the form of automated processes for taking medical histories and triage (the priority of assigning patients to the correct level of care and care unit). The purpose is to direct patients more efficiently to the correct level of care, which ensures that healthcare is provided in a resource-efficient manner.

New technologies provide new opportunities. In parallel with technological developments, new risks may arise, requiring care providers to further develop their activities to ensure that patient safety is a priority in the healthcare they provide. IVO will continue to monitor these developments, such as the development and implementation of artificial intelligence (AI) and other technical healthcare solutions being established in the healthcare sector.

## Concluding the inspection with decisions for the care providers

IVO has concluded its supervision of the 13 care providers with a decision for each care provider. Any shortcomings found have been highlighted in this decision and may be followed up on in the future.