Mental illness affects approximately 20% of the Australian adult population. Most people who seek professional help for mental illness will first consult their general practitioner. However, GPs may not always have the time, skills, or information necessary to deliver mental health services. Computers have the potential to overcome barriers to delivery of mental health services in general practice.

Use of computers in Australian general practice for administrative and clinical functions has increased significantly in the past decade. Forty-nine to 59% of GPs use the internet to access clinical information, and 38–47% to search for patient education material. It is uncertain whether these usage rates apply to clinical functions during consultations, although this is desirable.

Barriers to the use of computers in consultations include:
- technical (eg. lack of typing skills, software skills)
- financial (eg. cost of hardware, longer consultations)
- decreased communication (between practice staff, or doctor and patient), and
- psychological (resistance to change).

These barriers may be perceived rather than actual. For example, negative GP or patient perceptions of computer use effects on consultations (other than longer duration, and associated changes in communication styles) have not been found. However, more education is required for GPs to use computers effectively and efficiently.

The Better Outcomes in Mental Health Care (BOMHC) initiative encourages GPs to use electronic mental health resources (EMHRs), and to provide focused psychological strategies to patients where appropriate. There are few data on GPs’ use of EMHRs.

Methods
Face-to-face interviews were conducted with 27 GPs (21 women, 6 men) between April 2004 and March 2005 at their practices. Interviewees were participants in a trial of an internet based cognitive behavioural program for panic disorder and were level 2 accredited under the BOMHC initiative.

The interview was semistructured, and asked:
- what proportion of consultations used any electronic

Do GPs use electronic mental health resources?
A qualitative study

BACKGROUND
The Better Outcomes in Mental Health Care (BOMHC) initiative encourages general practitioners to use electronic mental health resources (EMHRs) during consultation with patients requiring psychological assistance. However, there is little data on GPs’ acceptance and use of EMHRs.

METHOD
Semistructured interviews were conducted with 27 GPs to determine their attitude toward EMHRs, and their use during consultation with patients.

RESULTS
Few GPs reported frequently using EMHRs in consultation. Identified barriers to use included lack of familiarity with information technology, and insufficient knowledge of available resources. Identified advantages of electronic resources included high patient acceptance, time efficiency, and improved quality of information.

DISCUSSION
General practitioners recognise several advantages of utilising electronic resources for managing patients with mental illness. However, GPs are not sufficiently familiar with electronic resources to use them effectively. This could be overcome by education.
health resource
• what proportion of consultations used a EMHR
• perceived advantages of using EMHRs in consultations, and
• perceived disadvantages of using EMHRs in consultations.

Ethical clearance for the study was granted by the Monash University Standing Committee on Ethics in Research Involving Humans.

Results
Most GPs reported use of electronic health resources during consultations. However, use of EMHRs occurred in only a small proportion of consultations.

Identified advantages and disadvantages of using EMHRs during consultation are listed in Table 1.

Caution should be exercised in extrapolating these results to all Australian GPs. The GPs interviewed were selected for their interest in mental health and may not be representative.

Discussion
General practitioners recognise several advantages to utilising EMHRs during consultations. However, they are not sufficiently familiar with technology, or the electronic resources available, to use them confidently. Some GPs are concerned use of electronic resources could result in loss of rapport with patients. Some GPs identify no advantages in using EMHRs.

Education could increase and improve GPs’ use of information technology, thereby benefiting patients.

Implications for general practice
• General practitioners rarely use EMHRs in consultation with patients.
• General practitioners regard EMHRs as efficient and up-to-date.
• Lack of confidence and familiarity are major barriers to GP use of EMHRs.
• Education could increase and improve GP use of EMHRs.

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References