

16 Jul 2019 | News

Amazon's Alexa To Offer UK Health Advice – But Critics Raise Privacy Fears

by Tom Gallen

The UK government has struck a deal with Amazon to make NHS-verified health advice available to users of the Alexa digital assistant. It says the move will help consumers to self-care with reliable healthcare information. However, detractors have questioned the government's motives and raised data privacy fears.

Consumers in UK seeking healthcare tips from [Amazon.com Inc.]’s Alexa digital assistant will now receive National Healthcare Service-verified advice.

The UK government has entered into a “zero-cost partnership” with online giant Amazon to ensure Alexa users receive “reliable health information from the NHS website.”

“We're pleased that Alexa is now going to be using clinically validated NHS content when it returns results,” the government noted, “as opposed to results from non-UK websites of varying quality.”

According to the government, the NHS website is visited almost 1.5m times each day with 44m hits in June from UK users.

Matt Hancock, the UK’s secretary of state for health and social care, said Alexa would provide information on common illnesses, potentially reducing the burden on healthcare services.

“We want to empower every patient to take better control of their healthcare and technology like this is a great example of how people can access reliable, world-leading NHS advice from the comfort of their home, reducing the pressure on our hardworking GPs and pharmacists,” Hancock insisted.

Amazon's algorithm uses information from the NHS website to provide answers to voice questions such as:

- “Alexa, how do I treat a migraine?”
- “Alexa, what are the symptoms of flu?”
- “Alexa, what are the symptoms of chickenpox”

Noting that half of online searches were expected to be made through voice-assisted technology by 2020, the government said the Amazon tie-up supported the commitment in the NHS Long Term Plan to make more NHS services available digitally.

A key focus of the plan – published at the start of the year – is on the prevention of health problems, with the NHS promising to do more to encourage people in England to take “control of how they manage their physical and mental well-being.” The government wants digitally-enabled care to “go mainstream across the NHS.” (Also see "[NHS 10-Year Plan A 'Missed Opportunity', Says PAGB](#)" - HBW Insight, 10 Jan, 2019.)

Data Privacy Fears

While the government positioned the Amazon partnership as beneficial for both patients and the NHS, the reaction to the news was mixed, with detractors questioning how users' data would be shared and suggesting the motivation for the deal was cost-cutting.

Tom Watson, deputy leader of the opposition Labour party, was highly critical of the government's decision to partner with Amazon.

“The giant data monopolies want one thing: more and more data to drive their huge profits,” Watson insisted. “Entrusting Amazon's Alexa to dispense health advice to patients simply opens the door to the holy grail - our NHS data.”

NHS Million, a grassroots campaign run by the service's staff which is critical of government cuts, questioned Amazon's ability to effectively provide the correct healthcare advice, joking “Alexa can't even play the right music on request.”

“We think the health secretary should stop spending all his time messing around with gizmos and start addressing the real issues in our NHS, like funding and staffing levels,” said NHS Million, which has a significant online following.

Responding to criticism of the partnership, the NHS's chief digital officer, Tara Donnelly,

insisted that the service took data privacy “extremely seriously.”

“All our data-driven technology initiatives are underpinned by a Code of Conduct,” Donnelly noted. “We also categorically confirm that no patient data is being provided to Alexa or Amazon.”

Addressing the motivation for the partnership, Donnelly insisted that asking Alexa “was never intended to replace attendance at GP practices or accident and emergency departments.”

However, many of those visits were not necessary, she pointed out, and making NHS information available through Alexa would help people “make a better decision on whether they should be going to a GP or A&E.”

“Many searches on the NHS website are for common minor ailments, and for information on symptom control for those living with long-term conditions,” Donnelly noted. “Often - with the right information - people are better able to self-care or ask a pharmacist’s advice.”