



Stephen Bourke,
co-founder, Echo





Flipping the scripts

Echo co-founder Stephen Bourke tells **Jack Carter** how his app is simplifying the repeat prescription process

Around half of all adults in the UK take a repeat prescription of some kind on a regular basis, yet 40% of those are not taking their medication as directed. This costs the NHS billions in waste every year. NHS England estimates that a third of 111 calls are related to medication supply, as are a fifth of inappropriate GP appointments and 2% of A&E attendances.

Anyone who has undergone the routine of reordering a prescription every few months will have found themselves wondering why, in a world where everything from taxis to takeaways can be delivered to their front door at just the tap of a touchscreen, it is still such a cumbersome process.

Doing away with it all is Echo, a free app that enables patients to bypass the GP appointments and trips to the pharmacist by ordering NHS prescriptions from their smartphone and having them delivered to their homes. “We didn’t start a healthcare company,” says Stephen Bourke, co-founder, Echo, “we started a convenience company.”

‘We’re delivering medicine, not pizza’

A patient-led service

Bourke has been on repeat medication for generalised anxiety disorder ever since he was a child. When he moved to Belgium, he got an understanding of what it was like to deal with healthcare systems outside the NHS. “I lived in Belgium for most of my teenage years, and I also spent a year in France, so I have lived in lots of different markets and experienced primary care and what it requires to get a repeat prescription in each of them,” he explains.

Bourke experienced what many who take repeat prescriptions experience – if the systems in place make it difficult for people to manage their own health, they’re unlikely to do it. “An estimated £17 billion was spent on new medication in 2016–17, yet nearly half of it isn’t taken correctly. We’re trying to remove the barriers and the effect of that is that people will live longer, healthier lives, while reducing the cost on the NHS.”

Echo was founded in 2015 by Bourke and co-founder Sai Lakshmi who, as an asthmatic, has also been on repeat medication for much of his life. Bourke was helping LloydsPharmacy launch an online doctors service in Ireland and Australia when he met Lakshmi, who was working at Apple. Both were inspired by how cutting-edge technology

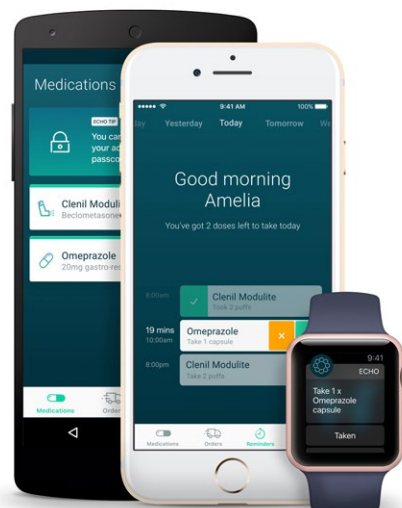
from the start-up community was infiltrating the healthcare sector, yet they were both having the same issues when it came to getting their repeat prescriptions every month: either the prescription hadn’t come through from the GP or, according to Bourke, it wasn’t in stock. “We said, ‘let’s fix this’.”

Condition management

Echo isn’t the first company to launch a product that helps patients manage repeat prescriptions. Now Patient and DIMEC both provide a courier-style service for medication via a smartphone or tablet and, like Echo, are approved by

the NHS. However, Echo says the app, which has had 182,000 downloads, is different from the rest because it helps patients with what it calls “condition management”, rather than just being an online pharmacy or a portal to GPs.

When users download the app, they are prompted to enter some basic information about themselves, such as their GP’s name and the prescription they need. This is then verified and sent onto their GP who decides whether to prescribe the medication or not. ►





► If approved, the prescription is received by Echo’s pharmacy which captures the fee (if there’s one to be paid) and posts the medication to the patient free of charge. Then comes Echo’s condition management service. The app takes the GP’s instructions and converts them into reminders and push notifications that will automatically appear on a patient’s phone telling them when to take their medication, and prompting them to reorder if they’re running low.

Echo says half its employees take repeat prescriptions themselves, meaning the product is designed by people who understand the issues its customers face. “We are trying to build a steak knife in a world of swiss army knives,” Bourke explains. “We want to build one thing that does that one thing exceptionally well. We want to build something patients can rely on.”

Accuracy in execution

Over the past 10 years, app technology has revolutionised

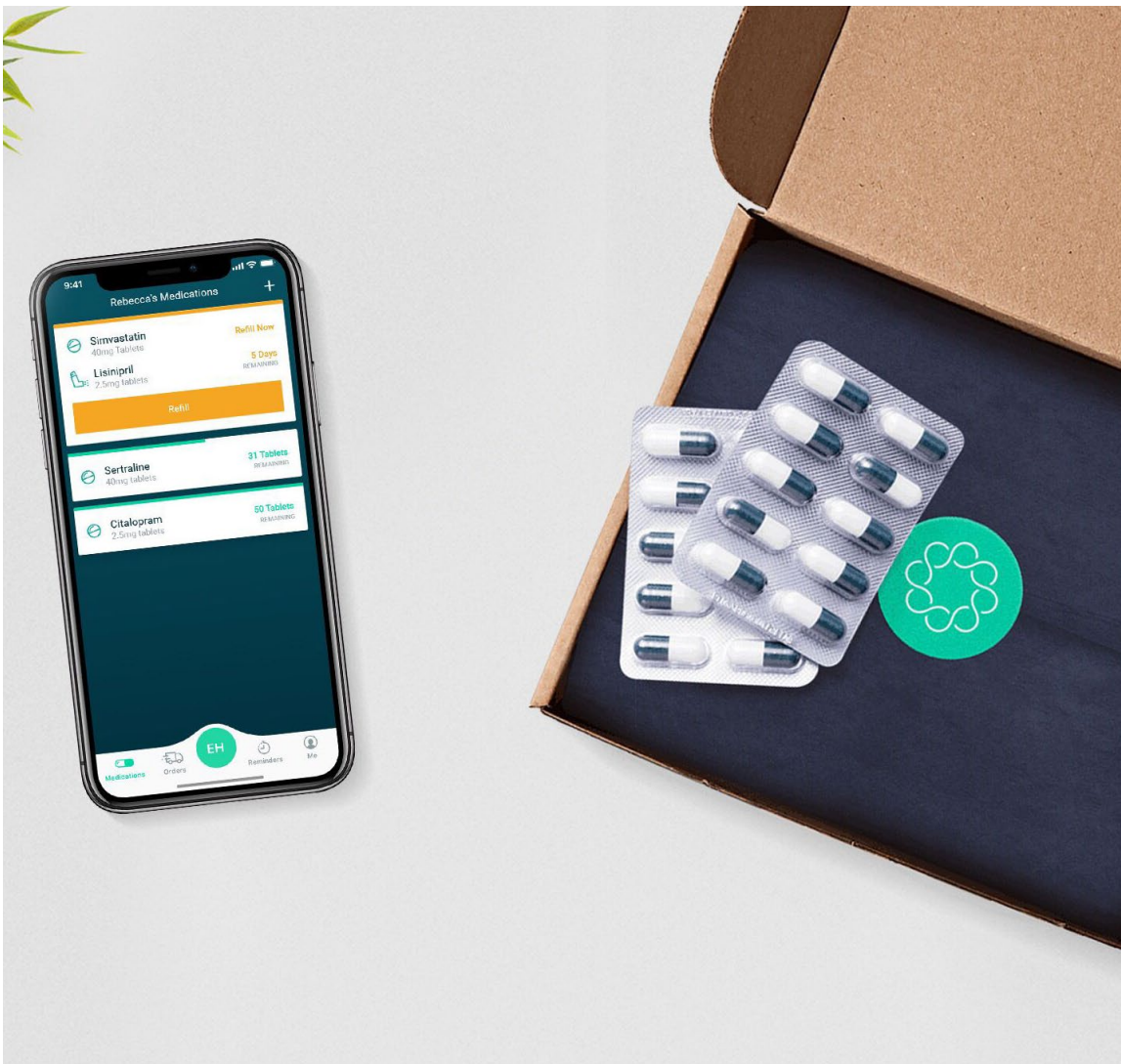
how society operates. It is no exaggeration to say that a person’s entire life can be lived via a smartphone. So it seems strange that it has taken so long for a service like this to come to market. But, the healthcare sector is unlike

any other and the challenges are vastly different. Not only is Echo responsible for safely managing its customers’ healthcare needs, but it must comply to strict data protection laws, and the company is under immense pressure to ensure all the right protocols are in place. As Bourke puts it: “We’re delivering medicine, not pizza.”

Accuracy is vital to whether or not Echo can deliver its service to patients successfully. Around 80% of what the company does is based around logistics,

Bourke says, which means having the right framework in place. “There’s a huge amount of responsibility when you’re in the healthcare sector to do exactly what you say you’re going to do, so we need to have laser focus. If we can’t get medicine into people’s hands then the business doesn’t work.”

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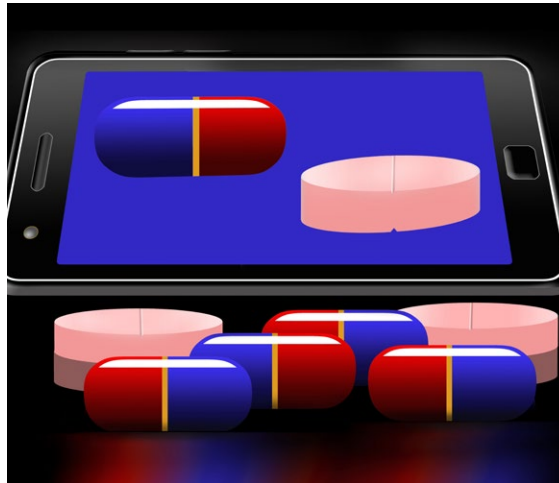




NHS backing

Echo has come under fire from pharmacies whose incomes are based on the number of prescriptions they dispense. If patients no longer collect their prescriptions over the counter, local pharmacies risk losing business. However, the NHS has been fully supportive of Bourke and Lakshmi's product, with the app featuring in the NHS Digital Annual Report for 2017-18. An estimated 87% of GPs throughout the UK have dealt with Echo directly already.

Bourke's personal goal is that one day the app will be able to signpost patients to solutions that can take them off medication for good. For the company, the focus will always be on getting medication into patient's hands in a safe and reliable way, while making sure Echo is the best delivery service on the market. ■



Stephen Bourke (left) and Sai Lakshmi (right), co-founders, Echo