



Things to consider if you're considering Telehealth.

It might be surprising to know that telehealth has been occurring for about 100 years now; there's evidence of radios being used in the 1920s to provide clinical advice to people in remote locations. The way telehealth is conducted or provided has changed greatly over the years as the technology which supports it has changed and developed.

What is telehealth?

Telehealth is providing health services remotely with the use of technology. There are many forms of technology which assist this such as phone calls, teleconference calls and sharing of images and videos.

There are many reasons why telehealth is used, such as geographical remoteness or an inability to travel, however generally they come down to

the patient and practitioner not being in the same location. While telehealth is very beneficial in supporting access to healthcare, it isn't without risk. And these risks need to be considered and managed before the service is provided.

Is it right for you?

Telehealth isn't ideal for all health practitioners or treatment types. Practitioners need to consider if it's right for their business, their patients and the services they provide. Below is a list of some factors to give thought to:

- > Which services suit telehealth and which don't?
- > Who'll provide you with technical support or advice when needed?
- > How will this telehealth service be communicated and promoted to patients?

- > How will patients be assisted if they have difficulty with the technology?
- > How will the success of telehealth services be evaluated?

Invest to do it well

The old saying 'if something's worth doing, it's worth doing well' really does apply to telehealth practices. When technology works well, it's fantastic, when it doesn't, it can cause a huge amount of frustration and time wasting. It's therefore important that health practices ensure the tools and technology used are suitable for that individual practice. It's also recommended that time is spent training all staff to be sure they understand how to use the technology and what's required of them. Investing both time and money will benefit the practice, practitioners and patients in the long term.

Some things stay the same

Much of what you're required to do as a health practitioner won't change when using telehealth.

- > **Communication** – health practitioners must ensure they're communicating in a way which is clear and effective in all clinical situations, including telehealth consultations. When using telehealth, practitioners may find they need to spend longer having conversations and explaining information to be sure they've been understood.
- > **Record keeping** – you need to keep detailed and accurate records of all consultations and communications with patients, and this includes when using telehealth. It's not just about actual consultations, details about phone conversations or other communication with patients also needs to be recorded. If a consultation takes place via telehealth, make a note of this in the clinical record including the type of technology used.
- > **Informed consent** – you need to ensure patients give their informed consent prior to treatment. Providing signed informed consent may be more

challenging when consultations are done using telehealth, however it can still be done. But remember, informed consent can only be given when the patient has been informed about the treatment, so sending a form to a patient for signing before there's been any discussion or consultation isn't appropriate. Also, verbal informed consent must be noted in the clinical record.

- > **Privacy** – you have a professional obligation to maintain the privacy and confidentiality of your patients. Therefore, when conducting a telehealth consultation, be sure it's done in a private setting where no one in the background can hear or see what's happening. Many forms of online communication, such as teleconferences, have a recording function. Consultations shouldn't be recorded simply because they can. They should only be recorded if there's a clear and specific reason for it and if the patient has given their consent.
- > **Clinical decision making** – incorrect diagnosis is one of the greatest risks with telehealth. If you don't have the information needed to make a

diagnosis or provide/recommend treatment, you must find a way to obtain this additional information. Practitioners may want to consider if their assessment processes alter when using telehealth. Practitioners should also be sure they don't allow the patient, or the treatment circumstances, to convince them to provide treatment or advice that goes against their better judgement.

- > **Practice within scope** – when consulting using telehealth, the need to keep within your recognised scope of practice, and refer when the situation is outside of this, is no different.
- > **Funding schemes** – some funding schemes, such as private health insurers and Medicare, provide cover for telehealth for some forms of treatment. As the treating practitioner, it's your responsibility to be sure you're meeting the requirements of the various funding providers and don't claim for items which aren't permitted.



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