

Exciting developments in telehealth

An exciting development in patient care over the past few years has been the increasing availability of telehealth. More health professionals, including physicians, are finding that telehealth is a relatively simple and low-cost way of improving patient care and reaching a greater number of patients.

But what is telehealth? Essentially, telehealth is a consultation between a patient and a specialist or consultant physician via videoconferencing. Clinicians can connect and consult with a patient without the need to be in the same place at the same time.

Telehealth can lead to significant improvements to the health of patients by providing better and expanded access to specialist care to those who find it difficult to access services.

Telehealth is especially valuable to patients living in rural and remote areas, who too often must leave their communities to obtain specialist services, which is time-consuming and expensive. Telehealth can also be valuable in urban and outer suburban regions, especially for those who find it difficult to travel, like frail and aged residents of nursing homes.

In addition to allowing physicians to deliver better care for their patients, telehealth can benefit physicians in a number of ways. Telehealth gives physicians another way of reaching patients: by offering video consultations, physicians can grow their business by filling in gaps in their list with a new remote client base. It can also save a lot of time—physicians who previously travelled long distances for consultations now find themselves making routine consultations from their home bases.

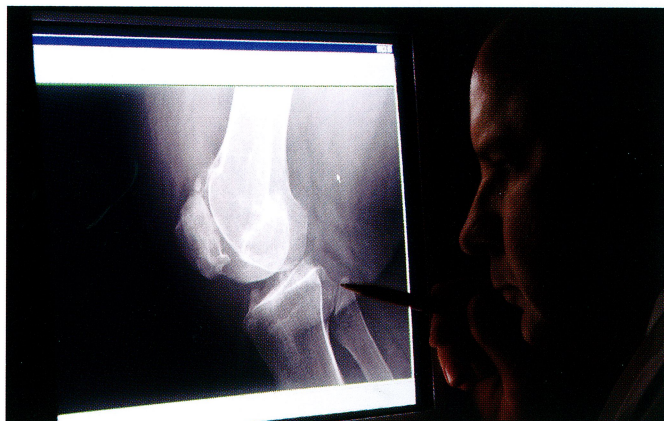
With these benefits in mind and the accelerating rollout of the National Broadband Network, the Australian Government now offers a number of Medicare Benefits Schedule incentives to support medical specialists wishing to offer telehealth consultations.

The headline incentive is the On Board Incentive, which is a one-off payment paid directly to a practitioner in two instalments. The first instalment is paid after the first valid telehealth MBS claim has been processed by the Department of Human Services (DHS) and the second is paid after the tenth valid telehealth MBS claim has been processed by DHS.

The payments are on a sliding scale to encourage early take-up. In the 2012/13 financial year, the incentive is \$4800, falling to \$3900 in 2013/14. The set-up costs of most beginner telehealth systems will be covered by the incentive. For detailed information about the On Board Incentive and other incentives, visit the Telehealth Page for Specialists on the MBS website at: <http://www.mbsonline.gov.au/internet/mbsonline/publishing.nsf/Content/connectinghealthservices-specialists>.

The RACP has recently launched the Physicians Telehealth Support Program to promote the uptake of telehealth among Fellows, trainees and Overseas Trained Physicians. The program will:

- provide information and support to physicians considering telehealth
- develop professional standards and clinical guidelines to govern the use of telehealth in clinical settings, and
- develop professional development opportunities in telehealth.



Utilising crucial expertise and practical insights from the Fellowship, the RACP is well down the path toward providing tangible scenarios and real-life case studies where telehealth is already in place and achieving results. We will also work with Fellows to demonstrate how you can easily get started in telehealth.

The RACP is also recruiting two new positions to help Fellows, trainees and Overseas Trained Physicians move towards telehealth. A Telehealth Support Officer will support physicians considering telehealth and give advice on issues, including technological requirements, and a Telehealth Communication Officer will raise awareness of telehealth. Please email policy@racp.edu.au to contact either officer.

The Telehealth Support Program will run until June 2013, and the Department of Health and Ageing is funding the RACP to run the program.

For further information about this project, please contact Luke Clarke, Manager, Policy and Advocacy, by email at luke.clarke@racp.edu.au or Nick Cox, Senior Policy Officer, by email at nick.cox@racp.edu.au.

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