

MBS rebates for telehealth enabled physicians

On 1 July 2011 the Australian Government, through the 'Connecting Health Services with the Future' initiative, sought to improve specialist services to patients living in rural and remote areas by promoting the delivery of online video consultations, referred to in the context of the Australian healthcare setting as 'telehealth'.

The tangible benefits of telehealth for the health professional and the patient have been well publicised and reported in recent months. These benefits include reduced travel time and costs for the patient and the specialist, more timely access to specialist advice, greater opportunity for building specialist-practitioner relationships and the potential to use telehealth for education and training as well as clinical purposes.

In addition to the above benefits and to encourage further the uptake of telehealth, rebates and financial incentives for specialists, general practitioners and health workers were added to the Medical Benefit Scheme (MBS) as part of the Commonwealth's telehealth initiative. Thirty-four telehealth MBS items were introduced to support both patient-end practitioners and specialists conducting telehealth consultations.

Since the introduction of the new telehealth items, more than 55,000 online consultations have been provided. Physicians have delivered more than 17 000 of these telehealth services (table 1) resulting in more than \$2.7million in MBS benefits processed.¹ (table 2)

Telehealth MBS services rendered
Jul 2011 - Nov 2012

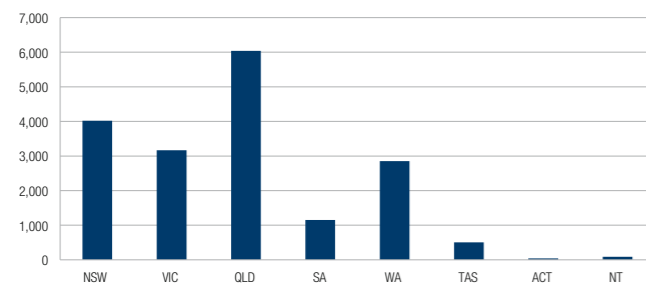


Table 1: Requested Medicare items processed (#112,149,3015,389)

Telehealth MBS items benefit (\$) processed
Jul 2011 - Nov 2012

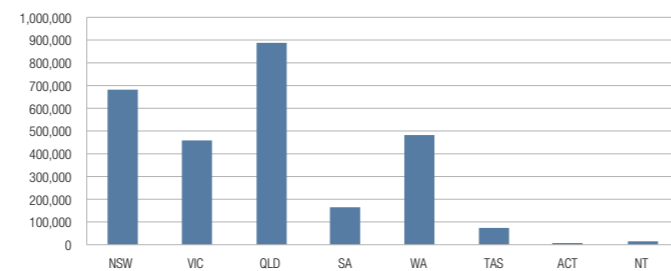


Table 2: Benefit denotes Medicare contribution to service
Source: Australian Government Medicare Australia

MBS telehealth information – a guide for physicians

The RACP Physicians Telehealth Support Project team has prepared the following advice on claiming the additional MBS telehealth items and incentives to support members who are ready to integrate telehealth into their clinical practice.

Eligibility

To be eligible for telehealth items, the patient must be in a regional or remote area. Residents of Aged Care Facilities and patients at Aboriginal Medical Services are also eligible, including those in inner metropolitan areas. Physicians can check their eligibility to provide telehealth consultations by following the links on the MBS Online website www.mbsonline.gov.au/telehealth

MBS items

Physicians can bill for a consultation provided to a patient by videoconference. Telehealth items are billed with existing specialist consultation items under the MBS and increase the base schedule fee for the consultation item by 50 per cent.²

There are two types of services covered by the new MBS items for specialist telehealth consultations:

- Type 1: The physician connects to the patient (who is physically located with another health worker, such as a general practitioner, nurse practitioner, practice nurse or Aboriginal health worker). This is known as a 'supported consultation'.
- Type 2: The physician connects to the patient without any clinical support at the patient-end. This is referred to as an 'unsupported consultation'.

Claiming telehealth MBS items

The lodgment of telehealth MBS item claims must be separate from other non-telehealth claims. For example, specialists can only claim the base consultation (Item 110) and derived fee (Item 112) together. This makes sure the derived fee item number is allocated to the correct base consultation item.

Bulk billing telehealth consultations

Additional incentives also apply to bulk billed telehealth consultations. In 2012-2013, the incentive is \$16.00 decreasing to \$13.00 in 2013-2014.

Even though the physician and the patient aren't at the same location during a telehealth video consultation, the patient's signature is still needed on the Bulk Bill (*assignment of benefit*) form.

There are three ways to get the patient's signature:

1. The supporting practitioner can get the patient to sign the *Bulk Bill (assignment of benefit)* form at their end and send the form to the physician.
2. The physician can send the completed *Bulk Bill (assignment of benefit)* form to the patient to sign and return to the physician.
3. The physician can get an email agreement from the patient.

On-Board incentive

In addition to the new MBS item numbers for telehealth consultations, physicians are eligible for the Telehealth 'On-Board' incentive which provides an extra financial benefit for physicians using telehealth. For 2012-2013 the total On-Board incentive is \$4800. The incentive is paid in two installments:

- First Telehealth On-Board installment: \$1600.
- Second Telehealth On-Board installment: \$3200.

This incentive is on a sliding scale and will reduce to \$3900 in 2013-2014 before formally ceasing on 30 June 2014.

Claiming the On-Board incentive

Payments are made after a claim is made following the first and tenth telehealth video consultations. The incentive is only paid once, no matter how many provider numbers a physician may have.

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RACP member support - Physicians Telehealth Support Project

If you would like further information on telehealth now is the time to contact the RACP Telehealth Support Officer, Diana Withnall on 02 9256 5432 or email telehealth@racp.edu.au.

Alternatively, visit the **new** RACP telehealth website (www.racptelehealth.com.au) for a suite of telehealth resources to get you started, including;

- RACP Telehealth: Guidelines and Practical Tips
- Access to the telehealth online Continuing Professional Development (CPD) module
- Further information on the financial incentives and MBS items for telehealth

