

The rewards and challenges of Telehealth: A practitioner's perspective



Dr Jorge do Campo, general medicine physician and seasoned telehealth practitioner spoke with Odette Grabinski, Telehealth Communications Officer and Diana Withnall, Telehealth Support Officer about how telehealth has improved patient services and has fostered long-term partnerships with his rural colleagues.

Following the Australian Government's substantial investment in resources to support health care workers to conduct telehealth consultations, specialists, general practitioners (GPs) and other healthcare workers are successfully using telehealth to complement existing patient services with online videoconference consultations.

RACP Fellow, Dr Jorge do Campo, a general medicine physician at the Launceston General Hospital in Tasmania, established his telehealth clinic in September 2011. Dr do Campo has conducted more than 60 telehealth consultations and provides telehealth services to two outer regional areas north of Launceston.



Dr Jorge do Campo telehealth

'Since 2008 I have been driving 80 kilometres to conduct outreach work at a medical centre in Devonport', Dr do Campo said. 'In September 2011, one of the general practitioners at the Devonport clinic I consult at invited me to participate in their telehealth clinic. Then in early 2012, I commenced telehealth services in Scottsdale, which is approximately 70 kilometres from Launceston.'

The rewards of telehealth have, in recent months, been widely publicised and discussed. The benefits of telehealth include reduced patient travel and associated costs, improved patient wait list times and enhanced patient continuity of care. For Dr do Campo, these benefits as well as the opportunity to collaborate with other health professionals to achieve better patient outcomes, makes telehealth a valuable initiative.

'It is very important to have some level of friendship or interaction with the general practitioner or health care worker; it is not simply a case of, "well we have telehealth, give me a call when you need me". Telehealth is always complementary to my visits and to my relationships with the team of GPs I communicate with.'

'Telehealth gives me a great opportunity to conduct consultations together with the GP, working elbow to elbow, with the patient included. So it is not a two person consult, it is a three person consult.'

For physicians considering telehealth, there is a range of suitable technology available. Telehealth ready healthcare workers can choose from a wide variety of hardware, software and web based video conferencing solutions to suit their needs. There are even facilitated solutions that offer a complete telehealth service package including appointment scheduling, technical advice and specialist and/or GP provider directories.

For Dr do Campo however, the majority of telehealth consultations can be conducted without the need for sophisticated equipment and services.

'I use a very simple solution based on Skype and mobile devices such as my iPhone and iPad. The GP can call me if an urgent consultation is needed. Because I am using my mobile devices [rather than] depending on big IT infrastructure, these consultations can be fast tracked.'

'To complement the consultation, I ask the GP to email me the patient's history and their investigations so when I do the telehealth consultation I have the information on email as well.'

'So, I use my tablet or smart phone together with a desktop computer or another computer where I have the referral letter and the details of the patient', Dr do Campo said.

'There is a big delay in the usual system with letters and referrals; telehealth has given us a tool to avoid this delay, to reach patients early, and to be more time efficient. Telehealth gives us a new area to explore our practice.'

The Royal Australasian College of Physicians has developed the Telehealth: Guidelines and Practical Tips to provide guidance to physicians on how to use telehealth effectively. The Guidelines provide practical advice on how to conduct telehealth consultations, specifically:

- The clinical aspects of telehealth
- How to conduct a telehealth consultation
- Technical aspects of telehealth
- Practical tips and ideas for how to use telehealth sustainably and effectively.

To access the Guidelines, visit www.racptelehealth.com.au/guidelines or contact the RACP Telehealth Support Officer to receive a hard copy.

Email: telehealth@racp.edu.au

Phone: 02 9256 5432.

The RACP Telehealth Support Project is an Australian Government funded initiative.

Odette Grabinski, Telehealth Communications Officer & Diana Withnall, Telehealth Support Officer

Odette.Grabinski@racp.edu.au

Diana.Withnall@racp.edu.au