

Update on the Physicians Telehealth Support Project

The winter edition of Mediscussion announced the College's Physicians Telehealth Support Project, a new initiative aimed at increasing the use of telehealth among Australian physicians. The spring edition of Mediscussion presents an opportunity to update Fellows on the Project.

The College is impressed by the potential of telehealth, which encompasses videoconferencing for medical consultations, as well as supervision and education. Telehealth is a valuable tool to help patients and physicians manage follow-up consultations, but it should not replace in-person consults, especially for initial consultations. Telehealth will improve patient outcomes, especially for rural and remote patients who often need to undertake the time-consuming and expensive exercise of travelling great distances to receive medical services. Telehealth is also valuable for residents of aged care facilities who find it difficult to travel. Telehealth technology also reduces the need for physicians to drive hundreds of kilometres for routine follow-up consultations in rural areas.

Encouraging the uptake of the use of telehealth services is the range of Medicare incentives offered by the Australian Government, which are listed at: <http://www.mbsonline.gov.au/telehealth>

The Australian Department of Health and Ageing is funding the Physicians Telehealth Support Project, which has four objectives:

1. Developing professional standards and clinical guidelines for physicians using telehealth
2. Developing professional development opportunities in telehealth for physicians
3. Promoting the benefits of telehealth to physicians
4. Providing technical support to physicians and their private practices.

The College has been working hard to establish the Telehealth Project since it began in late May 2012. The project has provision for two officers; thus, the first step in setting up the project was to recruit people to fulfil these roles. The Telehealth Communications Officer, Odette Grabinski, will promote the benefits of telehealth to Fellows. Diana Withnall, the Telehealth Support Officer, will provide support and advice to Fellows in three ways: from a telephone hotline, by facilitating an online community of practice and by making demonstrations at conferences.

Several other initiatives for the Project are also underway. First, work has begun on developing a Standards Framework to guide the clinical use of telehealth by physicians. Secondly, negotiations have commenced about designing professional development opportunities in telehealth. Thirdly, relationships with the Department, other medical colleges and health bodies have been built. Lastly, the Project's communication project and website building has begun.

The College has also established a Telehealth Working Group to support the Project to gain practical insight into the Fellowship's expertise in telehealth. The College received more than 50 expressions of interest in response to its call for nominations to the Working Group. This level of interest is indicative of the passion that many physicians have for telehealth. All these Fellows will act as important ambassadors for the benefits of telehealth.



The Fellowship's strong interest in telehealth was also demonstrated at Congress 2012. The College's telehealth booth received around 260 direct enquiries and Fellows offered strong support for the College's promotion of telehealth and expressed their interest in learning more about it. The booth displayed videos about the use of telehealth in medical practices, and hardware and software including digital stethoscopes were exhibited. A two hour telehealth information session was also delivered at Congress. Around twenty Fellows attended the session, which was facilitated by two Fellows and a representative of The Australian College of Rural and Remote Medicine.

The Project is scheduled to finish on 30 April 2013, and we encourage Fellows to contact the telehealth team as soon as possible on 02 9256 5475 or by email at telehealth@racp.edu.au.

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Telehealth Communications Officer