

Fact Sheet

Practical Guide to Telehealth for Physicians

This practical guide has been developed to provide an introduction to conducting telehealth consultations for physicians. It explains how physicians can use videoconferencing technology to conduct online consultations with patients at their general practitioner's (GP) consulting rooms, Aboriginal Medical Services and residential aged care facilities (RACFs) or in their own homes.

Step 1: Finding patients

Physicians wishing to offer telehealth consultations to their patients first need to find patients who are willing to engage in a telehealth consultation.

How can physicians find patients?

Physicians should look first to providers with whom they have an existing relationship. Physicians may have relationships with GPs, Aboriginal Medical Services or RACFs. If a GP in a rural or remote area regularly refers patients, perhaps these consultations could be conducted via videoconference with the GP in the room.

Telehealth can be used to replace some face-to-face consultations, including pre-consultation and follow-up discussions between the specialist and patient. Telehealth may also be used to complement outreach work, especially work conducted in remote areas, and allow physicians to see patients between outreach visits.

Which patients are suitable for telehealth?

Existing patients may prefer to participate in telehealth consultations, particularly if they find it difficult to travel, or would like to reduce their travel time. Patients with young children or people who rely on family members or carers to travel to face-to-face consultations may also be interested in using telehealth.

Step 2: Determining the appropriateness of telehealth

How can telehealth be used effectively?

Telehealth has been successfully used in cardiology, endocrinology, rheumatology and many other specialties. Before conducting a telehealth consultation, physicians must decide whether telehealth is clinically appropriate given the patient's condition and needs. The patient may require additional support during the consultation in which case a GP or health worker may be able to competently provide support. More information is available in the RACP's publication *Telehealth: Guidelines and Practical Tips*.

Step 3: Technical equipment

What hardware is needed for telehealth?

Physicians should consider using technology they are already familiar with during telehealth consultations. In most cases, there is no need to buy new equipment as a laptop with a built in webcam and microphone will usually suffice.

To use existing desktop computers, a good quality webcam can be purchased for under \$100 and a headset with a microphone, or speakers, can be purchased at a relatively low cost. Tablets and smartphones with videoconferencing applications may also be used for telehealth where good internet access is available, although these devices at present have significant limitations in the quality of the video.

The ACRRM Technology Directory has a list of available technologies. For more information visit the ACRRM e-health website www.ehealth.acrrm.org.au.

What software applications can be used for telehealth?

There are a range of videoconferencing solutions that can be used for telehealth. Web-based videoconferencing solutions and other video conferencing software packages can be used on any computer with a good internet connection, webcam and microphone. There are more advanced telehealth solutions available and some of these incorporate billing and scheduling to help manage appointments.

Physicians conducting a large number of telehealth consultations may like to consider using telehealth specific software. There are some telehealth facilitated solutions that are standards based, high quality and inexpensive. A list of these solutions and their features can be found on the ACCRM e-health website, referred to previously.

There are a number of factors that may influence a physician's choice of videoconferencing technologies. Physicians may be contacted by GPs who have patients they wish to refer who would like to conduct the consultation via videoconference. In this case physicians need the same videoconference software as the GP.

For physicians based in hospitals, using a tablet or a laptop that is not connected to the hospital's main IT infrastructure may allow physicians to consult with GPs and patients who do not have access to the hospital's telehealth network. Otherwise, physicians may be able to use the existing hospital videoconferencing infrastructure. It should also be noted that some states have preferred software providers, and physicians should confirm whether this is the case before commencing telehealth consultations.

What type of internet connection is required for telehealth?

A broadband connection with upload and download speeds greater than 0.7 Mb/s are recommended however some videoconferencing solutions may require more or less bandwidth. A bandwidth test that measures both upload and download speeds can be accessed here: <http://www.speedtest.net/>.

Physicians may need to upgrade to a better internet plan or change providers if the connection is unreliable. Physicians may need to speak with their Internet Service Provider (ISP) about upgrading their service, especially if the upload speed is not sufficient. If physicians find they are conducting a large number of videoconferences, they may like to consider installing a second, dedicated internet connection for telehealth.

Step 4: Preparing for the telehealth consultation

How do physicians ensure a safe and effective telehealth consultation?

Physicians conducting consultations with GPs or other physicians should check that their internet speed (both uploads and downloads) is fast enough to facilitate a telehealth consultation.

If physicians are using a new type of software or hardware for the first time, or are connecting with a GP or other health professional for the first time, they should connect with the GP or patient in advance to ensure the connection is sufficient. Practice managers or administrative staff may be in a position to test the connection, ideally on a day before the consultation takes place and just before the scheduled telehealth consultation time. To accurately test the connection, the test should be conducted at the same time of the day as the scheduled telehealth consultation as internet speeds and available bandwidth vary throughout the day.

During the test, also check the lighting of the room, the room set up and image quality. This is especially important for first consultations to ensure that the patient end is set up correctly.

Things to consider during a telehealth consultation include:

- Will privacy be assured?
- Will the consultation be free from disruptions?
- Will the videoconference be secure?
- Does the patient have the support they require at the patient end?

Ensure the GP or the patient (or both) have copies of any relevant material that will be discussed in the consultation, such as test results.

How should the room be set up?

The room should be well lit, with no direct light from behind the patient and no light shining directly into the participants' eyes. The webcam should be placed at eye level (on top of the screen is best) so that eye contact can be maintained. Physicians should place the patient's image on the screen as close as possible to the webcam, typically at the top of the screen in the centre. This seems more natural from the patient end as you will appear to be looking directly at them.

The room should be quiet and free from excessive background noise. There should be enough space to conduct the consultation comfortably in consideration of any movements the patients may have to make.

Physicians should evaluate their use of telehealth and the room set up, and make changes to improve the quality of the telehealth consultation as they become more experienced.

What happens if there are technical difficulties during the consultation?

Physicians should ensure they have the patient or GP's phone number, so that if the videoconference disconnects the consultation can continue over the phone.

Step 5: Claiming MBS items

How are physicians reimbursed for telehealth?

Consultations conducted via videoconference are listed on the Medicare Benefit Schedule, unlike consultations conducted via phone or email.

Billing arrangements are flexible and a patient's method of payment will depend on the specialist's billing system. Patients may pay any gap by credit card or the physician may choose to bulk bill the consultation.

How do physicians bulk bill telehealth consultations?

There are three main ways of bulk billing patients depending on the circumstances of the telehealth consultation:

1. Patients can sign the bulk bill (assignment of benefit) form in the presence of the supporting medical practitioner
2. The physician can send the form to the patient for signature and return or
3. The specialist can get an email agreement from the patient.

To secure an email agreement, the specialist should send an email outlining the details of the service, item numbers, benefit amount, date and time of the consultation, patient's and practitioner's name. Physicians should not include the patient's Medicare number or their provider number due to privacy reasons. The email must include the following statement: "If you, the patient, agree to the assignment of the Medicare benefit directly to the provider (bulk bill), reply to this email with the word "yes", and your name."

The email should be kept on file, and a bulk bill (assignment of benefit) form should be completed with "email agreement" written in replacement of the patient's signature. More information on billing and how to claim is available from the MBS online website www.mbsonline.gov.au.

For more information visit www.racptelehealth.com.au