

Telehealth for Patients with Chronic Complex Medical Needs in Response to COVID-19: The Patient Experience

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Background

- Telehealth, the use of telecommunication (e.g. phone calls, videoconferencing) to provide health consultations,¹ was rapidly adopted in hospital outpatient clinics during the COVID-19 pandemic as a method of harm minimisation.²
- At Alfred Health telehealth was rolled out to support the ambulatory care needs of high risk patients, including transplant and other immunosuppressed patients in the renal, respiratory, gastroenterology and cardiology units.
- Telehealth significantly changed the workflow and practices of clinical and operational dispensing pharmacist. Medical teams had to adapt to the lack of physical examination of patients and worked closely with pharmacists to prevent interruption and delays to medication therapy.
- There were mixed reports of patient satisfaction and clinician experience of telehealth, particularly the patient experience of medical consultations. The patient experience about pharmacist-delivered telehealth remains unknown.^{3,4}

Aim

To evaluate the opinions of patients about telehealth services delivered by medical and pharmacy staff during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Method

A phone-based patient survey was conducted at Alfred Health, a large metropolitan tertiary-referral health service in Melbourne, Victoria.

Participant identification and recruitment:



Participant inclusion criteria and survey development process:

Inclusion criteria: reasonable English, cognitively intact, not terminally ill, stable social and living conditions, stable mental health.	Survey development: • Input from telehealth pharmacists, medical units, Patient Experience staff, and Alfred Health consumer group. • Face and content validated established with consumer in-put. Modifications made following feedback.	Key survey concepts: • Convenience • Engagement • IT issues • Overall satisfaction
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Modes of telehealth delivery:

- Clinicians: Telephone or video (HealthDirect)
- Patients: via their personal device

Results

Demographics Medication Supply during COVID

A total of 269 patients agreed to participate, with 154 (57.2%) being contactable and completing the survey (Table 1).

Table 1: Participant demographics (n=154)

Demographics	
Gender, male, n(%)	87 (56.5%)
Age, average (SD)	57.8 (14.6)
Clinics, n (%)	
Cardiology	3 (1.9%)
Respiratory	50 (32.3%)
Renal	95 (61.7%)
Gastroenterology	7 (4.5)
Previous experience of a face-to-face consultation with Alfred, Yes, n (%)	142 (92.2%)

37.5% of patients stated telehealth changed the way they obtain prescriptions and medications

1 in 5 patients experienced medication supply issues during the pandemic

Patient Experience: Pharmacist-delivered telehealth

96.3% of patients felt their expectations were met for supplying prescriptions/medications

94.1% had the opportunity to ask questions

94.9% had their questions/concerns adequately addressed

Reason	Number of responses
Medication Supply	115
Confirming the medications	41
Answering medication related questions	13

* multiple responses possible

Figure 1: Patient perceived reasons for pharmacy telehealth consultations

Results

Patient Experience: Medical Telehealth

Delivery mode

"A video telehealth consultation was/would be better than a telephone consultation."

Response	Number of responses
Strongly Disagree	6
Disagree	21
Neutral	45
Agree	46
Strongly Agree	29
Unsure	2

93.9% thought the doctor obtained a good medical history

61.3% Did **not** think the lack of physical examination was a problem

Figure 2: Delivery mode of medical consultation

Figure 3: Preference for video or phone consultation

Overall Patient Experience

Overall feedback on telehealth consultations

Feedback Category	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
Took place at an appropriate time	3	8	4	75	59
Convenient form of health care	0	2	4	72	71
As good as face-to-face consultation	13	42	27	47	20
Overall Satisfied	0	3	1	77	66

Figure 4: Overall feedback on telehealth consultations

Table 2: Preference for future consultations

Preferred option for future consultations, n(%)	
Telehealth consultations only	18 (12.1%)
Face-to-face consultations only	17 (11.4%)
The choice of either type of consultation	114 (76.5%)

Discussion

- Telehealth was well accepted by patients and is an effective medium for healthcare delivery during the COVID pandemic. Patients found telehealth to be convenient, reflective of healthcare access being an important aspect of a positive patient experience.
- Over one third of patients stated telehealth changed the way they obtained prescriptions/medications; particularly with uptake of postal delivery. Almost 20% of patients experienced medication supply issues, including with immunosuppressants.
- Over one third of patients did not consider telehealth as good as face-to-face consultations and three quarters wanted the flexibility to choose the delivery mode of clinical consultations in the future.
- Currently, Alfred Health ambulatory services are being delivered with a mix of telehealth and face to face appointments.
- This study was limited in sample size and inclusion of patients from a limited number of medical clinics; it would be subject to selection and response bias.
- Understanding the patient experience of telehealth has contributed to the redesign and streamlining of practices in the outpatient pharmacy, including the implementation of an online ordering process for patient medication ordering.
- These results will be used to inform a patient focus group to further explore the identified themes and will inform a pharmacist survey to investigate the impact of telehealth on pharmacists' workflow and professional satisfaction.

Conclusion

- Patients were able to adapt and adopt to telehealth effectively in response to the COVID19 pandemic.
- Overall, the vast majority patients had a positive experience with medical and pharmacist telehealth services.
- Patient perceptions and experiences support the inclusion of both face to face and telehealth options in future workflows to ensure high-quality, patient-centred healthcare delivery.

References

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