



Patients' experiences of telehealth during lockdown: Key messages

During the March-May 2020 COVID-19 level 3 and 4 lockdown period, several groups undertook research with whānau and patients on how they were accessing primary health care and their experiences of telehealth (primarily telephone and video consults, but also interactions by email and online). General practice had to rapidly adopt telehealth as part of the COVID-19 control measures and this was a new experience for both GP teams and patients.

These are some of the key messages from this research. We hope that they may inform practice as the potential for heading into another protracted period of lockdown increases.

Patients' views on telehealth in general:

- Most patients are happy with telehealth, especially for known issues, and many are willing and keen to try video consults. For those who prefer in-person visits, empathy and active listening is even more important.

Reaching out during lockdown:

- Patients appreciate pro-active contact about what changes are occurring and what they can expect. They also need to know that services are still open and available and that they need not put off seeking help. Websites can be useful to share current information, if regularly updated.
- Bulk texts with a link to more information on a practice website is another useful way to keep patients informed.
- Patient portals are also appreciated as a means of communication, particularly for ordering prescriptions and when phone lines are busy.
- Patients want to know how the process of electronic prescribing works and when to expect the pharmacy will receive the prescription.

For all practice staff:

- Some people are frightened and may be abrupt so it is important to take your time, listen and build empathy. Patients sense kindness and the smile in your voice.
- People pick up on any sense of panic, disorganisation and dismissiveness and this will put them off seeking help.

For reception staff:

- Patients want to know the costs of telehealth, payment processes and whether they will be charged for an in-person consultation if this is required after the telehealth consult.
- Patients appreciate being asked if they have a preferred/usual clinician or if they want the next available telehealth appointment. Most would prefer to have their own doctor but are happy with another if rapport-building is successful.
- When patients are sitting at home waiting for the doctor, they have no cues about when they will be 'seen'. This can be a cause of stress and problematic for people who are working and have other meetings booked in the day. Some ways to mitigate this are to provide a confined time range for the telehealth consult (e.g. you will be phoned/video-called between 10 and 10:45am), advise on what to do if the call is delayed or the technology fails and proactively notify the patient of significant delays.



For clinical staff:

- A sense of privacy and safety during telehealth consults can be created by telling patients where you are and who is in the room and asking them those questions too.
- Particularly for telephone consults, diagnostic questions that are clear and concise and reflective listening help patients feel heard and understood.
- Patients want to help when possible, e.g. taking photos, recording temperatures or blood pressure.
- Patients often have good judgment about when they need to be seen. Successful telehealth occurs when there is mutual trust between the patient and the clinician.

For more information

- A webinar recording from 4 August on Consumer research in general practice is available to view here: <https://youtu.be/gHiksGBROQ4>
- To learn more about the research undertaken by the Health Services Research Centre, Victoria University of Wellington (in collaboration with University of Otago and University of Auckland), contact lead researcher Dr Fiona Imlach at Fiona.imlach@vuw.ac.nz
- For information about the Healthcare Home Collaborative focus groups findings, contact collaborative@hch.org.nz
- For telehealth consumer resources, visit www.healthnavigator.org.nz/health-a-z/t/telehealth/