

**The Models of Care Programme virtual health initiative, uses communication technologies to provide healthcare when patients and care providers are not in the same physical location. Thereby avoiding the stress and travel that comes with having to attend appointments in person.**

# VIRTUAL CONSULTATIONS

## A SPECIALIST'S VIEW

Dr Saxon Connor, a specialist surgeon at Christchurch Hospital says we can't underestimate the impact travel has on patients. He regularly consults with patients from Nelson and says it's often those who have to travel that are in poorer health.

"Technology is at a level now where, other than a physical presence, there is very little difference between a virtual consultation and a face-to-face appointment," Dr Connor explains. "Before a consultation all the assessments have been done so the meeting is about the conversation. In my experience, a nurse or GP is always present with the patient, so I am comfortable that the patient is being supported."

He says his role is to talk to the patient about their situation and treatment plan and this can be done via video as effectively as meeting in person and it is less exhausting for the patient.

Dr Connor is heartened with the steady increase in the number of virtual consultations and encourages all patients to take up the opportunity of a video consultation if their health allows for it.



Dr Saxon Connor

## A PATIENT'S VIEW

Mr La Pang was a patient who required advice and treatment from a specialist in Christchurch and was able to attend his appointment from Nelson via a video consultation.

Originally from Burma, Mr Pang now lives in Nelson with his wife and family. Following a diagnosis, he was faced with having to travel to Christchurch to attend specialist appointments. Neither he nor his family speak English, so for the 75 year-old the logistics of travel were quite daunting. On top of this, Mr Pang's condition affected his mobility, meaning standing or sitting for extended periods was difficult.

"The long distance to travel, so much time waiting and also the need for a lot of people to help with interpreting and movement made it very difficult last time," Mr Pang explained.

Mr Pang was identified as a suitable candidate for a virtual consultation. So for his next appointment, rather than undergoing the discomfort of another trip to Christchurch, his sons were able to drop him off at Nelson Hospital where he met with a translator and public health nurse. With their help, he spoke to his neurologist at Christchurch Hospital via video link.

*The relative simplicity of the technology and the opportunity to interact with it have all helped to create a level confidence in video consultations.*

"I am a lot happier with local appointments and for me I didn't feel much different — as long as I have an interpreter," Mr Pang says.

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The initiative will eventually extend into other community settings as well as into people's homes — bringing care truly closer to home.



## A VIRTUAL CONSULTATION JOURNEY

Despite the excellent healthcare facilities and support available in Golden Bay many patients have to complete a 100 kilometre trip, traversing the winding Takaka Hill, to see a medical specialist in Nelson. An appointment may be brief or require no physical examination, yet it involves a lengthy trip, which can be costly and taxing for older or post-surgical patients.



Some small but exciting steps have been made towards using virtual consultations in the bay. General Manager of the Golden Bay Community Health Centre (Te Hauora o Mohua), Linzi Birmingham, is part of the national Ministry of Health Telehealth Leadership Group which advises on deployment priorities, technical considerations, barriers and other matters relating to virtual consultations. Linzi believes the introduction of virtual health will be transformational for the bay.

"The use of virtual consultations is a significant initiative," she says. "It's about valuing our patients' time as much as we value our own."

She says it would mean a change of thinking for many people but it is very exciting.

"Once all the barriers around connectivity and security have been removed it will become a valuable tool for us to use in the provision of healthcare in Golden Bay. Watch this space."

## VIRTUAL SPEECH-LANGUAGE THERAPY CONSULTATION WELCOMED

When Ann Lewis started having trouble with her voice, a specialist diagnosed a lack of collagen in her vocal cords and referred her to speech-language therapist Michele Cunningham.

"I saw Michele on one of her regular visits to Golden Bay and she raised the option of doing the therapy via virtual consultation," says Ann. "I thought it was a splendid idea. Why travel over the hill if I don't have to?"

Michele initiated a pilot virtual health programme in Golden Bay as part of her career and salary progression project.

"I spent awhile exploring and trialing technology and settled on using the video conferencing platform ZOOM," Michele says.

Michele did an initial assessment with Ann and then set up a therapy programme using virtual health where appropriate.

"Speech-language therapy sessions don't always need to be face-to-face. But you do need good equipment as voice therapy is about sound and whether the pitch is stable and sometimes that can be hard to tell on a video link," she says.

Ann says Michele prepared her before their sessions started and she knew what to expect.

"There was a slight glitch with the sound in the first session but we muddled through," she says.

Michele admits there are still some teething issues with the technology, but she's had great support from Nelson Bays Primary Health Organisation and Golden Bay Community Health staff.

Despite the issues both Ann and Michele agree their virtual health experience has been a success. Ann says although she is quite comfortable driving over the hill she resents having to spend a whole day away from home.

"If we hadn't done a virtual health consultation there wouldn't have been as many sessions and the therapy would've been harder to do," she says. "I think it's a fantastic idea and I didn't feel it was less of a session because of the technology."

"Some people my age may not be comfortable with the technology — but in another ten years it might be different," she says. "It wasn't an issue for me and it certainly beats travelling."



Ann Lewis and Michele Cunningham.