

Case Study

Virtual care: Telehealth is enabling specialist care and reaching patients in rural and regional areas

Virtual clinics are helping to improve clinician resourcing for patients in the Mackay region – enabling them to video conference with regular clinical specialists in lieu of travelling long distances to appointments.

In order to reduce long wait times for appointments with specialists and to help improve clinician resource management, in 2014 Mackay Base Hospital and Health Services (MHHS) in Queensland implemented a new telehealth model, Specialist Telehealth, developed in collaboration between Mackay Hospital and Telstra Health. Telstra Health have now delivered this virtual clinic model for over three years.

“Telehealth services were well established here already but we had some issues with servicing demands for outpatient services, so we started to investigate other telehealth options to augment our capacity,” explains Cathie Le Riviere, Manager of Virtual Health for MHHS.

MHHS was approached by Telstra Health and began a trial of Specialist Telehealth with 40 patients in rheumatology and neurology.

Mackay Base Hospital and Health Services (MHHS) is using Specialist Telehealth to improve access to specialist care for rural and regional patients.

A range of specialities are accessible via the telehealth platform including but not limited to rheumatology, neurology, hepatology, endocrinology, respiratory and haematology.

“Off of the success of that, our executives decided to incorporate a public-private model as a permanent arrangement,” says Riviere. They have since expanded the service to include respiratory, hepatology, endocrinology, and some haematology patients.

Telstra Health was chosen as the provider following a tender process. “They provided a more all-round solution, in terms of the panel of specialists that were accessible via Telstra Health’s telehealth platform, and their ability to ramp it up and down in line with our demand needs and fluctuations,” says Riviere.

The benefits of a managed service solution

Specialist Telehealth works via video conferencing supported by scheduling and billing applications, all within Telstra Health's technology platform. This technology, together with the sourcing of specialists and comprehensive coordination, provides an end-to-end solution for service delivery in virtual clinics.

"We're well established with telehealth and good at using the technology but using the Telstra Health arrangement we can also dial into a concierge service. The concierge links us to the specialist, who may be anywhere in Australia. It's simple and it's coordinated on our behalf," says Riviere.

Specialist Telehealth has helped MHHS to improve management of its waitlist numbers and clinical specialist resourcing, meaning patients who could potentially wait up to a year before can now be seen much sooner, including for follow-up and review appointments.

"The 'fail to attend' and 'new to review' ratios compare very well to our in-person consultations. Essentially, the Specialist Telehealth model provides a full end-to-end service and case management from the referral to the discharge, back to GP for our patients," says Riviere.

The managed service solution features a concierge service that can connect the MHHS to specialists located anywhere in the country.

Better access to care for rural and regional patients

"Patients who participate in this model benefit from [access to] very intensive end-to-end care. The specialists are very interested in the clinical problem and the patients as people, and our nursing and administrative staff manage the cases very carefully to make sure there is no wasted time or downtime," says Dr John Haddock, a generalist in emergency medicine at Mackay Base Hospital and the clinical lead for Telehealth.

Having worked in rural and remote locations throughout his career, in both Australia and overseas, Haddock knows the unique challenges of providing care in these areas.

"Patients in rural and remote places can get advice and intervention from specialists at the hub hospitals and it also helps rural practitioners who need the support of specialists from the hub hospital."

Haddock says the telehealth patient experience is very similar to in-person specialist appointments, even for older patients with limited technological experience who may therefore have some initial anxiety about telehealth appointments.

"People are getting more and more used to video conferencing [and] FaceTime or Skype with their grandchildren, for example. Younger generations FaceTime, Skype and WhatsApp all the time and they're very used to that image-based interaction."

"All of the specialists who participate are very personable, welcoming, warm individuals. It's not this odd technological artefact that's occurring with a robot on the other end. Mostly, the feedback from patients has been really very, very positive," he says.

Contact us to find out how Specialist Telehealth can help your health organisation move towards a more connected future.

To learn more

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