

Hunter New England clinical telehealth: removing the distance between patient and clinician

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Every year, regional patients from Hunter New England (HNE) travel over 20 million kilometres to attend outpatient appointments at our facilities.

To address this, HNE Health is rolling out telehealth utilising smart technology to transform the delivery and practice of clinical health care through a secure, virtual and mobile health environment. The provision of health care through this innovation is developing new models of care that are benefiting regional and rural patients, Aboriginal people, and elderly and palliative patients. It is also continuing the delivery of world class care, while saving significant travel and personal costs and time for our patients.

Telehealth in HNE represents a shift in focus away from historical care models where instead of patients coming to tertiary facilities to receive specialist outpatient services, they can receive personalised, patient-centred care at home or much closer to home. Our focus is on embedding telehealth into all aspects of care delivery, and making it available and accepted across all disciplines and specialties. We are also concentrating on removing all barriers that are preventing the widespread uptake of telehealth, including lobbying at state and federal levels for changes to the Medicare Benefits Scheme.

In implementing telehealth we are also mindful that as a health service we need to cater for all patients, regardless of their socio-economic status. Throughout our district a number of communities have relatively poor access to broadband internet and/or suitable devices for home-based telehealth. In these situations we offer viable alternatives where patients receive telehealth appointments at nearby facilities or local practitioner's premises. In select circumstances, people with high health care needs are also offered loan devices to facilitate more responsive, home-based care. For a health district the size of Hunter New England Health, this represents a strategic shift in health care delivery.

In the short time since telehealth has been introduced, we have saved patients over 1000 nights away from home and 530,000 km of travel. In terms of cost savings, our modelling indicates that patients have saved \$650,000 on direct transport and accommodation costs. The growth of telehealth services throughout the district has been doubling each year—a trend that looks set to continue into the future.

Through implementing telehealth, HNE Health is achieving the Triple Aim of health care improvement: Better patient-centred care, improved health of the population, and reduced per-capita cost of health care. Our models of care are the way of the future—but available now.