

...healthy and sustainable rural, regional and remote communities.

Telehealth here to stay, but safeguards and improvements needed

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The future of telehealth is in the spotlight in the latest issue of the *Australian Journal of Rural Health*.

A [piece](#) by National Rural Health Alliance CEO Dr Gabrielle O’Kane highlights how the rapid rollout of telehealth during COVID-19 has helped rural, regional and remote health care workers and consumers, but warns that if telehealth is here to stay, connectivity and quality need to be improved and local providers need to be protected.

“There’s no doubt that telehealth has been a game-changer during the pandemic,” said Dr O’Kane.

“Prior to COVID-19, Australian governments had implemented digital health reforms in a fractured way and the pandemic was the catalyst to change that. Change had to happen and it had to happen quickly.”

“Once the pandemic has passed and the country opens back up again, we need to ensure that telehealth remains on the table – not just to make it more convenient and accessible for people in rural areas where there is a shortage of health care workers and long travel times for treatment, but to open the door to flexible and innovative models of care.”

Dr O’Kane said that while telehealth needs to remain going forward, there were issues that still need to be addressed if it was going to be a part of the health landscape for good.

“Connectivity, including poor internet coverage, is still a big issue in rural, regional and remote Australia. It’s hard for health professionals to do a telehealth consultation if the internet keeps dropping out on either their end or the patient’s end, or if one or both don’t have enough bandwidth.

“We’re still finding that many patients, including those who are elderly or from non-English speaking backgrounds, find telehealth difficult to use or don’t feel comfortable using it. So we need to invest in programs to improve digital health literacy for both consumers and health care providers.

“Finally, rural health care providers’ businesses will be put at risk if they’re not protected from online-only providers based in the big cities that offer no local services, because it means these rural practices won’t be viable and people won’t be able to access face-to-face services when they need them.”

The piece can be viewed [here](#). The rest of the August issue of the *Australian Journal of Rural Health* is available [here](#) and full articles or authors’ contact details are available on request.

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The National Rural Health Alliance is Australia’s peak non-government organisation for rural and remote health.