

EHEALTH AND TELEHEALTH IN RURAL AND REMOTE AUSTRALIA



...good health and wellbeing in rural and remote Australia

Rapid advances in information technology and the promise of high-speed broadband have combined to act as a catalyst for the development of a range of potential eHealth solutions to some of the challenges faced by people living in rural and remote Australia.



eHealth refers to the health care components delivered, enabled or supported through the use of information and communications technology. It includes:

- clinical communications between healthcare providers;
- patient access to specialist services via online consultation and a range of online tools and resources; and
- professionals' access to information databases and decision support tools.

eHealth has potential to improve health outcomes at all levels: from preventive health, specialist and acute care and self-management of chronic conditions, through to home monitoring for people living with disabilities.

Telehealth

Telehealth services such as video-conferencing - when used appropriately - are emerging as effective ways to complement local health services. They can:

- deliver health services into remote communities, reducing the need for travel;
- provide timely access to services and specialists, improving the ability to identify developing conditions;
- help educate, train and support remote healthcare workers on location; and
- support people with chronic conditions to manage their health.

Medicare Benefits Schedule (MBS) items have been introduced to provide rebates for people who live outside the major cities to have telehealth consultations with medical specialists in other locations. MBS items have also been introduced for GPs, other medical practitioners, nurse practitioners, midwives, Aboriginal health workers and practice nurses to provide face-to-face clinical services to the patient during the consultation with the specialist.

The rebates are only available to patients in rural, regional and remote areas (under the Australian Standard Geographical Classification Remoteness Area system) and to residential aged care facilities and Aboriginal Medical Services throughout Australia. The patient and the remote specialist must be at least 15 kilometres apart.

A broad range of medical specialties in Australia is already involved in the delivery of medical care by way of telehealth. Medicare covers a small base fee for health professionals over and above a number of the existing MBS attendance items when services are provided via videoconference. A range of financial incentives is also available to encourage change in billing and scheduling systems, IT systems, staff training and capital improvements for appropriate rooms. Details of the rebates and incentives are available at mbsonline.gov.au/telehealth

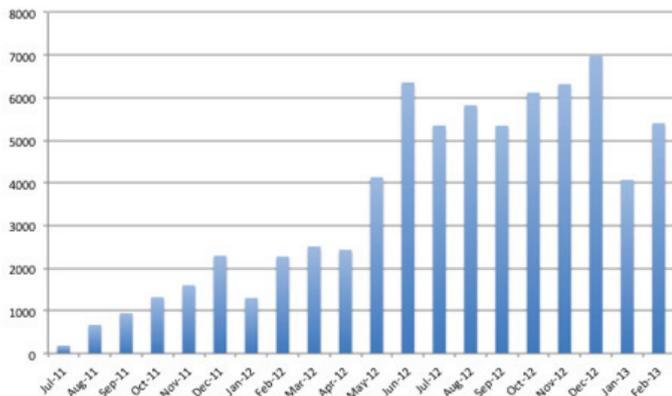
Professional support for the adoption and use of eHealth and telehealth:

- Australian College of Rural and Remote Medicine (ACRRM) - To find a telehealth specialist or generalist, or to register yourself or your practitioner, go to ehealth.acrrm.org.au;
- National Rural Faculty of the Royal Australian College of General Practitioners - See racgp.org.au/your-practice/e-health/ for information such as "Getting started guidelines" for video-consultations and rollout seminars for the eHealth record;
- CRANAPlus, the Australian Nursing Federation (ANF) and other nursing and midwifery organisations from the Nursing and Midwifery Telehealth Consortia - www.apna.asn.au (go to Resources/Telehealth).

The uptake of video consultations has grown steadily since the introduction of Medicare rebates and incentives for eligible practitioners.

By the end of March 2013 the Department of Human Services had processed MBS payments for over 77,000 telehealth services provided to over 33,000 patients by

Total video consultations in Australia July 2011 – February 2013



over 7,700 practitioners; and over 155 residential aged care facilities had provided telehealth services.

Other telehealth programs are designed to provide allied health and other support services beyond Medicare and private medical practice. For example, VidKids, a pilot project funded by the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, provides services to children with hearing or vision loss living in rural and remote areas. The project utilises video conferencing to stream therapy, counselling, diagnostic services, technological assistance and education support into the homes of children living in rural and remote areas of Australia.

The eHealth record system

Each year the average Australian has around 22 interactions with the health system, made up of four visits to a GP, 12 pharmacy prescriptions, three visits to a medical specialist, two to an allied health professional, and one to a dentist. Until recently, this information had to be held in separate locations with different health practitioners and hospitals.

Patients can now register for the Australian Government's eHealth record, launched in June 2012, for a secure online summary of their own health information. The patient can control what goes into it, and who is allowed to access it. Key health information can be drawn from the patient's existing records. This will give health professionals access to patient information such as medications, test results, discharge summaries, allergies and immunisations. eHealth records will allow people who live in rural and remote communities to have their essential health information where and when they need it, whether at home, visiting a GP, travelling to a regional centre for specialist allied health or medical advice, in hospital or in an emergency.

People can register for the eHealth record and access the Learning Centre for more information at ehealth.gov.au Support for clinicians to register for the eHealth record can be found at nehta.gov.au

According to a survey by Accenture in 2012, the majority of Australian doctors (77 per cent) said sharing health records electronically had a positive impact on reducing medical errors. Around 70 per cent reported improved quality of diagnostic and treatment decisions as a result of their use of shared electronic health records. As at July 2013, almost 5000 GP practices and over 550,000 Australians had registered for the record.

The Practice Incentive Program eHealth Incentive encourages general practices to keep up to date with the latest developments in eHealth and adopt new eHealth technology as it becomes available (see amlalliance.com.au then select *eHealth for Medicare Locals* under *Medicare Local support*). To be eligible for the PIP eHealth Incentive, practices must be registered in the PIP and meet five requirements, one of which is the adoption of a personally controlled electronic health record system.

Mobile software applications

Mobile apps are assisting people to manage their health and wellbeing and health professionals to provide better care. There are apps to encourage people to participate in screening programs or seek professional advice about breast cancer, hearing loss and depression. Others assist people to manage their fitness and monitor alcohol consumption. Students and healthcare professionals use apps to access information about diseases and drug interactions; images of clinical matters and procedures; and continuing education activities, among other things. Examples include:

- the Australian National Preventive Health Agency's *National Drugs Campaign* – information and advice for parents and young people on illicit drugs;
- Department of Health and Ageing's *My QuitBuddy* – personalised quit smoking tips, daily motivational messages and countdown;
- *National Health Services Directory* – to find General Practices, Pharmacists, Hospitals and Emergency Departments; and
- *my child's eHealth record* – where parents can keep track of and add to the eHealth record of their children under 14.

Mobile apps have a range of applications which can improve the lives of rural people. For example the NSW Department of Primary Industries has developed a 'Useful apps for Australian agriculture - iPhone and iPad' page, and the Australian Emergency Management Institute has a page on its website www.em.gov.au listing apps which provide information on road closures, power outages, bush fire locations, flood warnings and more.