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Telehealth at Waitematā DHB – remodelling a health service post COVID-19

Plans to expand the use of telehealth beyond COVID-19 are being fast-tracked by Waitematā DHB following widespread use throughout the lockdown period.

The option of video and phone consultations has been available in some services for a number of years at the DHB. But more have enlisted its use during lockdown with good effect - highlighting the many benefits of a virtual approach to healthcare when face-to-face outpatient consultations are not required.

“We moved rapidly during Alert Level 4 lockdown to successfully offer telephone and video conference options for clinic,” Waitematā DHB Chief Medical Officer and cardiologist Dr Jonathan Christiansen says. “Within four weeks we were delivering around 40% of specialist appointments by telehealth. That number was at approximately 60% by week six and 70% in week seven.”

Telehealth options have been delivered across 25 services during lockdown. The DHB is now working to support the model in the longer term by developing more electronic tools to assist with the delivery of paperless clinics

“There are still many patients who need to be seen in person for good clinical reasons - including examination and diagnostic testing,” Dr Christiansen says. “But we are also able to identify many others who do not need a face-to-face consultation in order to receive high quality care.”

Dr Christiansen says the convenience factor for those patients who opt for a telehealth approach can be huge.

“Some of these patients endure lengthy drives, multiple buses, delays and stress, and a single clinic visit may require them or a family member to take a half-day of annual leave. Others may have appointments across multiple specialties – sometimes in a single week. During my own phone clinics, patients have commented on the advantages of not having to come to North Shore from Muriwai, Wellsford or elsewhere, and yet still get the opportunity to discuss their issues and have questions answered.”

Waitematā DHB Chief Executive and Northern Region COVID-19 lead Dr Dale Bramley says the telehealth option is enhancing patient experience and contributing to better health outcomes.

“In some services, such as diabetes, we have had amazing success, with a lower rate of cancellation than would normally be the case as our patients embrace the offer of appointments via Zoom and other digital platforms. More than 90 per cent of appointments in this service have gone ahead during lockdown and our diabetic patients have continued to receive the support they need to manage their condition effectively. The COVID pandemic has forced us to look at healthcare differently and we can already see it has offered us some important clues for how we should adapt in the future.”

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