

The patient-practitioner relationship in telehealth: Hepatitis C treatment and changing care practices during COVID-19

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Background: During the COVID-19 pandemic, telehealth took a prominent role in the treatment and follow-up care of hepatitis C. Previous studies have shown the importance of a positive patient-practitioner relationship in treatment outcomes and attitudes to healthcare among people living with hepatitis C, but little is known about how telehealth shapes this relationship and experiences of treatment.

Method: Using the concept of 'proper distance' to conceptualise how relationships are negotiated as a result of digital technology, this presentation explores how telehealth shapes perceptions of proximity, care and responsibility. Based on a project funded by the Australian Government Department of Health, the presentation draws on in-depth interviews conducted with patients (n =15) and healthcare practitioners (n = 25) who used telehealth for hepatitis C treatment and care during the pandemic.

Results: Our analysis suggests that in changing patient- practitioner proximity, telehealth can change experiences of attention and care in hepatitis C treatment. First, the experience of being socially distanced from healthcare practitioners lessened patients' concerns about encountering and managing stigma in person because they felt less exposed. Second, and less positively, the relative 'distance' of telehealth (compared to in-person care) may impede close attention by encouraging perfunctory or routine healthcare. Finally, by contrast, because telehealth makes healthcare more accessible, it can enable more attentiveness through the layering and repetition of contact. These variable effects have implications for how participants perceive responsibility in healthcare relationships and the potential for stigma.

Conclusions: Thinking about telehealth in terms of distance and proximity allows us to understand its effects in ways that exceed understandings of it simply as a technology of healthcare provision. Telehealth changes conventions in communication and care, and these changes require further consideration in the design and delivery of telehealth care models for hepatitis C treatment.

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