

THE ROLE OF TELEHEALTH IN ABORTION AND CONTRACEPTION CARE.

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Background:

The COVID-19 global pandemic has necessitated swift advances in the integration of telehealth to mainstream health systems within Australia. Telehealth has been widely adopted to ensure timely access to abortion and contraceptive care during the pandemic. However, we are still coming to understand the strengths and limitations of telehealth, and the intricacies of how and when telehealth is best used to provide abortion and contraceptive care into the future.

Methods:

Three cross-sectional online surveys released in July (n=37), August (n=34) and September (n=25) 2020, and 19 semi-structured interviews from December 2020 to April 2021 with health professionals who provide abortion and contraception services across metropolitan and rural Victoria, Australia. Participants included nurses, GPs, midwives, social workers, service managers, obstetricians and gynaecologists.

Results:

Participants described protocols for history taking, patient education, consent, treatment and follow-up that maximised the safe use of telehealth in conjunction with in-person care. For many, this enabled more streamlined and comprehensive service provision, including increased patient education. Telehealth enabled continuation of high-quality care, with no observed increase in clinical risks. Many indicated that telehealth increased access, particularly in rural regions, and often enabled faster access. Several highlighted the greater convenience and acceptability of telehealth for individuals seeking care. However, participants also expressed several concerns, including reduced ability to identify visual patient cues and undertake routine physical examinations, difficulties coordinating interpreters, unreliability of internet, and variable comfort with phone/video consults. The continued importance of person-to-person contact for connected, supportive care was also highlighted. However, some also regarded telehealth as a potentially less confronting way for individuals to communicate concerns with a health professional.

Conclusion:

Participants viewed telehealth as a beneficial and sound approach to providing abortion and contraceptive care into the future. Further research and guideline development is needed to ensure quality of care is not compromised.

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