# Becoming Telehealth Enabled

## What is Telehealth?

Telehealth refers to the 'use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) to deliver health services and transmit health information over both long and short distances' (International Organisation for Standardisation).

For Medicare purposes, a **telehealth attendance** means a professional attendance by video conference where the health practitioner:

- has the capacity to provide the full service through this means safely and in accordance with professional standards; and
- is satisfied that it is clinically appropriate to provide the service to the patient; and
- maintains a visual and audio link with the patient; and
- is satisfied that the software and hardware used to deliver the service meets the applicable laws for security and privacy.

Video-conferencing refers to the transmission of real-time (live) audio-visual data via the internet. It is the medium most progressed for the provision of telehealth and in particular for outpatient services, tele-psychiatry and patient and health professional education.  As such, the term telehealth is sometimes used interchangeably with video-conferencing or video-consultations.

## Getting started with telehealth

There are three fundamental requirements to enable telehealth to take place.  The attached flowchart "Becoming telehealth enabled' illustrates the process of addressing these requirements.

- Internet connectivity
- Software
- Hardware

## Internet connectivity

The audio-visual quality of telehealth is directly related to the speed at which the data is transmitted along the internet connection.

Testing the speed of an internet connection can be easily undertaken by visiting the following website http://beta.speedtest.net/.

If the upload speed of the internet connection is too slow (ie less than 512kps), contact your Internet Service Provider (ISP) to discuss options for improving your current connection.

Fibre, ADSL2+ and 4G (LTE) wireless connections are the most desirable options. Satellite connections do not generally meet the minimum data transfer requirements.

If the internet connection cannot be improved, for telehealth may be less than optimal. In these circumstances, you may want to consider options for **telephone attendances** rather than telehealth. The rollout of the National Broadband Network (NBN) may provide improved options in the future. Visit the NBN website www.nbnco.com.au for further information.

If the current upload speed is adequate, it is also important to consider whether your network can cope with the extra data transfer for telehealth. The extra network activity may impact on the rest of the practice (upload and download speeds slow dramatically on some network connections when extra data usage occurs).

For advice about your organisation's network, consult your ISP or IT professional.

## Software and hardware requirements

Telehealth and videoconferencing service solutions are managed by service providers and offer a variety of packages at different prices, some of which are free. These packages often include the software and hardware required for telehealth and may include initial set-up, ongoing support, bridging services for multiple point video-conferences and booking services.

**Software** refers to the use of either paid or free software downloadable from the internet to be used on current hardware (ie computer). There are software options designed specifically for telehealth, as well as widely used options for video-conferencing. It is best to compare both software and service solutions, and determine which option suits your needs most.

When considering what software to use, consider experience of your patients and in managing patient flow. Software options that have a virtual 'waiting room' can be useful for both the patient and practitioner.

It is also important to consider the level of security provided by each solution or option. Most software solutions will connect both participants to a server rather than directly to one another, therefore creating opportunity for malicious users to intercept or interfere with the session. The security of any data collected through video-conferencing, such as photos or recordings of the consultation, must also be considered.

**Hardware** refers to the physical equipment that is required to undertake telehealth, such as a microphone, speakers and a camera. When choosing your hardware, it is important to consider more than simply meeting the audio/video standards for adequate video-conferencing. It is also important to consider the location(s) that the video-conferencing will take place, the number of people that will be using the equipment, and whether or not you plan to use it for other purposes, such as education and meetings.

## References

**Australian Government Department of Health**

http://www.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/Content/e-health-telehealth

## Further Information

The following websites provide further information on software and hardware options.

**Australian College of Rural and Remote Medicine**

www.ehealth.acrrm.org.au

**Royal Australian College of General Practice**

http://www.racgp.org.au/telehealth

**Medicare Benefit Schedule Online**

www.mbsonline.gov.au/telehealth

WWW.PRACTICEASSIST.COM.AU

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