

Prevention C+olumn

HEALTH AND TECHNOLOGY – MAY 2021

Health in the era of technology

Can technology improve our health system, from virtual consultations to making online appointments? Absolutely! We just need to get things right and resolve the major ethical challenges involved. Here's a snap shot of the revolution in the field of health care.

- 70% of Canadians believe that **virtual care represents the future of health care.**¹
- 41% of Canadians would like access to video consultations with their healthcare professional.²
- In 2018, only **4% of family doctors** in Canada offered their patients the option of **video consultations.**³



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What is telehealth?

The arrival of new information and communication technologies (ICT) has definitively changed social interaction. Sharing the results of scientific research, conveying information and commercial processes have all been transformed. It's also the case with health care. Interactions between healthcare professionals and patients must keep up with these innovations.

Legal and ethical challenges

As with any innovation that affects aspects of society, there are ethical and legal considerations associated with the expansion of telehealth that we need to think through together.

Patient consent

Patients must be appropriately informed about the risks, limits and benefits of proposed treatments, including remote health care. Healthcare professionals will need to set out clear terms and conditions to which their patients must consent before beginning remote health care.

Protection of data and personal information

If we wish to provide remote health care, we must consider privacy issues. Who wants their health information to fall into the wrong hands? With increased exchange of information by ICT, we need to build robust protective structures for protecting patients' information.

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GLOSSARY:

Telehealth is health care and services provided at a distance using technological means.

It includes:

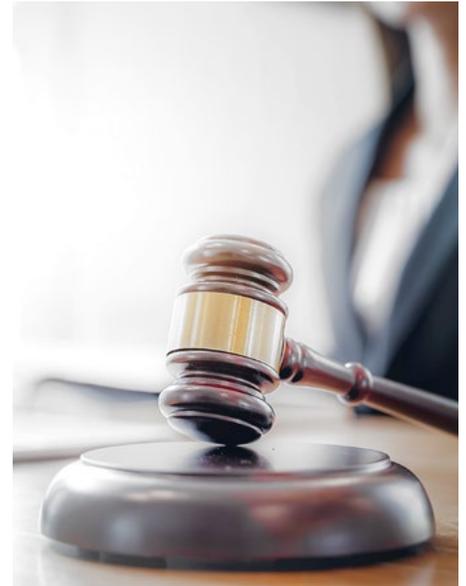
- **Telemedicine**, which is the practice of medicine at a distance using ICT.
- **Teleconsultation**, which is a consultation that allows a patient to interact remotely with a healthcare professional using ICT.
- **Telemonitoring**, which is remote clinical interpretation of a patient's data using ICT. The data can be collected by the patient or by another healthcare professional for diagnostic or treatment purposes.⁴ ■

Legal and ethical challenges - cont'd

Policies and regulations: The need to adapt

The current legal and regulatory framework is not yet adapted to the new reality of expanding telehealth. Some experts have raised the fact that policies, legislation and regulations are sometimes contradictory and confusing, particularly with regard to insurance claims, standards of practice and issuing of licences and authorizations to practice.⁵

In Canada, the rules related to licences to practice are a provincial jurisdiction. However, ICT eliminates borders. Can a healthcare professional continue to monitor a patient who moves to another province? Can a patient consult a healthcare professional in British Columbia if he or she is a resident of New Brunswick? Will the consultation be recognized, reimbursed and taken into account? These simple questions with important legal ramifications highlight the urgency of reviewing healthcare legislation. Many professional associations in the healthcare sector are thinking about these questions in order to establish guidelines for their members' practice, while also ensuring patients' well-being. In the meantime, if in doubt, check to see if the services are covered by your insurer. ■



“70% OF CANADIANS BELIEVE THAT VIRTUAL HEALTH CARE REPRESENTS THE FUTURE OF HEALTH CARE.”

BENEFITS AND LIMITATIONS

According to the findings of a study done by Environics Research,¹ 70% of Canadians believe virtual health care represents the future of health care. Increased access to health care, reduction of travel and wait times, fewer work absences, reduction of contact with other sick patients: There are numerous benefits! However, this solution also has limitations.

BETTER ACCESS FOR ALL

According to the World Health Organization, we will be short 18 million healthcare workers in the year 2030. On the other hand, an increase of 20% in productivity will compensate for this, some experts believe. And among the solutions likely to increase this productivity, telehealth will play a significant role.⁶

In addition, the emergence of health care technology is seen as a means of overcoming the inequalities in delivering health care to low-income populations and communities with fewer services.

IMPROVEMENTS IN MANAGING CHRONIC ILLNESS

The benefits of telehealth in managing chronic illness are real. For example, patients with diabetes or cardiovascular diseases whose situation is stable can be monitored remotely. In certain cases, telemonitoring allows for detecting signs of a patient's worsening condition and being able to react quickly before it deteriorates.

Telehealth also allows for patients to be more invested personally.

Result:

- Reduction of the number and length of hospitalizations
- Decline in the number of emergency consultations
- Improved quality of life
- Reduction in the severity of illness
- Reduction of the number of deaths⁷

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BENEFITS AND LIMITATIONS

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MORE RESOURCES FOR MENTAL HEALTH

We know that mental health issues are among the most frequent reasons for consultations and work absences and that they also lead to numerous other consequences. By combining more rapid access and tools for facilitating a multi-disciplinary approach, teleconsultations seem to be a very promising option. Reduced wait times to speak to a professional means reduced risk of a problem becoming chronic and more serious.

COMPLEMENTARY, BUT NOT A SUBSTITUTE

The 2019 WHO guidelines recommend that telemedicine be practised as a complement to and not as a substitute for personal care.⁶ Some people advocate that there must be a preliminary face-to-face meeting to establish a patient-physician relationship.

It's true that some disorders do require a physical examination or auscultation: musculoskeletal disorders, unusual lumps, abdominal pain, loss of hearing or vision, etc. In addition, face-to-face meetings allow patients and professionals to be more candid and discuss delicate subjects or notice subtleties that are not easily perceived on line. ■



EVERYONE'S RESPONSIBILITIES

Healthcare professionals must ensure that the quality of the care they provide to their patients is equivalent to face-to-face care, but they also have other responsibilities when offering telecare. They need to appropriately inform their patients about the terms and conditions of remote services and the limits of teleconsultations in order to obtain their informed consent.

As for patients, they must:

- Be on time for their appointments and use a device that is fully charged and functional
- Submit any necessary documents, photos or other items requested by the healthcare professional before the appointment
- Download the virtual solution used by the healthcare professional, whether software or an application
- Be equipped with a headset or be in a closed space where they can't be overheard to protect the confidentiality of their conversation ■

A promising future

The current health system is under pressure. This situation may worsen with the ageing population, proliferation of cancers and chronic illnesses as well as the need to rapidly treat psychological health issues. Telehealth opens a world of possibilities to deal with these challenges.

If new technology has the potential to improve access to our health system and make it more efficient, the shift to technology forces us to reconsider the legal and ethical questions and redefine everyone's roles and responsibilities, including those of patients! ■

- 1 Enviroics Research, *Canadian Attitudes on Healthcare and Telemedicine*, [On line: <https://www.dialogue.co/canadian-attitudes-on-healthcare-and-telemedicine>] (consulted March 14, 2021).
- 2 Canada Health Infoway *Connecting Patients for Better Health: 2018*, [On line: <https://www.infoway-inforoute.ca/en/component/edocman/resources/reports/benefits-evaluation/3564-connecting-patients-for-better-health-2018?Itemid=188>] (consulted March 14, 2021).
- 3 Canada Health Infoway, *2018 Canadian Physician Survey*, [On line: <https://www.infoway-inforoute.ca/en/component/edocman/resources/reports/benefits-evaluation/3643-2018-canadian-physician-survey?Itemid=188>] (consulted March 14, 2021).
- 4 All definitions based on the glossary provided by the College of Quebec Physicians, *The Physician, Telemedicine and Information and Communication Technologies, Practice Guidelines*, [On line: <http://www.cmq.org/publications-pdf/p-1-2015-02-01-en-medecin-telemedecine-et-tic.pdf>] (consulted March 14, 2021).
- 5 Rita M. Marcoux and F. Randy Vogenberg, "Telehealth: Applications Front a Legal and Regulatory Perspective", [On line: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5010268/>] (consulted March 14, 2021).
- 6 Canadian Medical Association, *Virtual Care in Canada: Discussion paper*, p. 2 and p. 14, [On line: https://www.cma.ca/sites/default/files/pdf/News/Virtual_Care_discussionpaper_v1EN.pdf] (consulted March 14, 2021).
- 7 Canadian Medical Protective Association, "Telemedicine – Opportunities, challenges and obligations", [On line: <https://www.cmpa-acpm.ca/en/advice-publications/browse-articles/2013/telemedicine-challenges-and-obligations>] (consulted March 14, 2021)