

MEDIA RELEASE

Telehealth pod helps doctors maintain patient care during COVID

A soundproof pod equipped with digital technology is allowing doctors at Waitematā DHB to connect with patients and hold confidential consultations that would otherwise have been postponed during the COVID resurgence.

Doctors enter the pod, close the door behind them and then host secure video or phone appointments that would normally have been held face-to-face as part of the DHB's push to embrace telehealth options for maintaining patient care.

The new pod being trialled in the Outpatients Department at North Shore Hospital includes a computer, phone and online toolkit so doctors can video call or phone patients at their home or workplace. It frees up a clinical room for essential face-to-face appointments to continue and provides privacy for clinicians and their patients.

Patients have embraced telehealth, with the DHB delivering just over 26,500 virtual appointments between 23 March and 3 July – compared with 1,246 for the whole of 2018. This equates to patients saving nearly 100,000 kilometres in travel and nearly \$4 million in travel costs and loss of earnings.

Patient feedback on telehealth appointments has been positive. Benefits of video and phone appointments include reducing the risk of exposure to COVID, increasing convenience and improving access to outpatient appointments.

“By giving patients the option to connect and communicate with their doctor from their own home removes hurdles for people, whether this is transport, finding child care or having to take time off work to go to an appointment,” says Chief Medical Officer Dr Jonathan Christiansen.

“Face-to-face consultations are still required for many patients for clinical reasons but if high-quality care can be provided via telehealth, we offer patients that option.”

The DHB's Institute for Innovation and Improvement (i3) is now planning to set up a second telehealth pod in the community for patient use.

“Not everyone has access to a computer, the internet or the space to take a call,” says Director of i3 Dr Penny Andrew.

“Providing high-quality healthcare to the community, cost-effectively, is vital in reducing health disparities.

“By trialling a telehealth pod in the community, will offer some important insights in how we can provide healthcare to communities in the future. We hope this trial will help bridge the digital divide,” says Dr Andrew.

The telehealth pod will be trialled for eight weeks and then be reviewed as part of the DHB’s ongoing commitment to provide timely, convenient and effective care to its communities.

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