



**NCETA**

National Centre for Education  
and Training on Addiction

# Use of telehealth for Alcohol and Other Drug counselling

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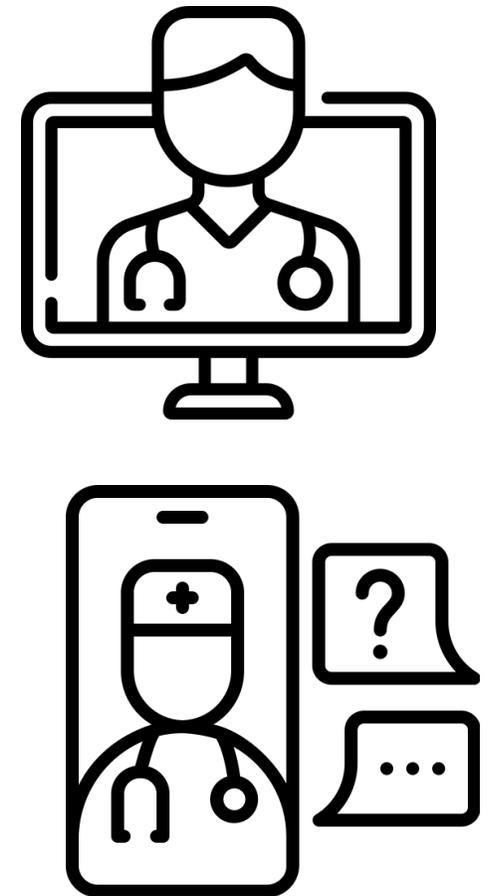
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# Introduction

- Rapid uptake of telehealth (phone or video) services across the health system due to the COVID-19 pandemic, including within the alcohol and other drug (AOD) sector (Hey et al., 2021).
- Many clients report high satisfaction with telehealth counselling, thanks to its convenience, privacy, and accessibility (Hey et al., 2021; Woolley et al., 2024).



# Effectiveness and barriers

Telehealth counselling being valued due to:

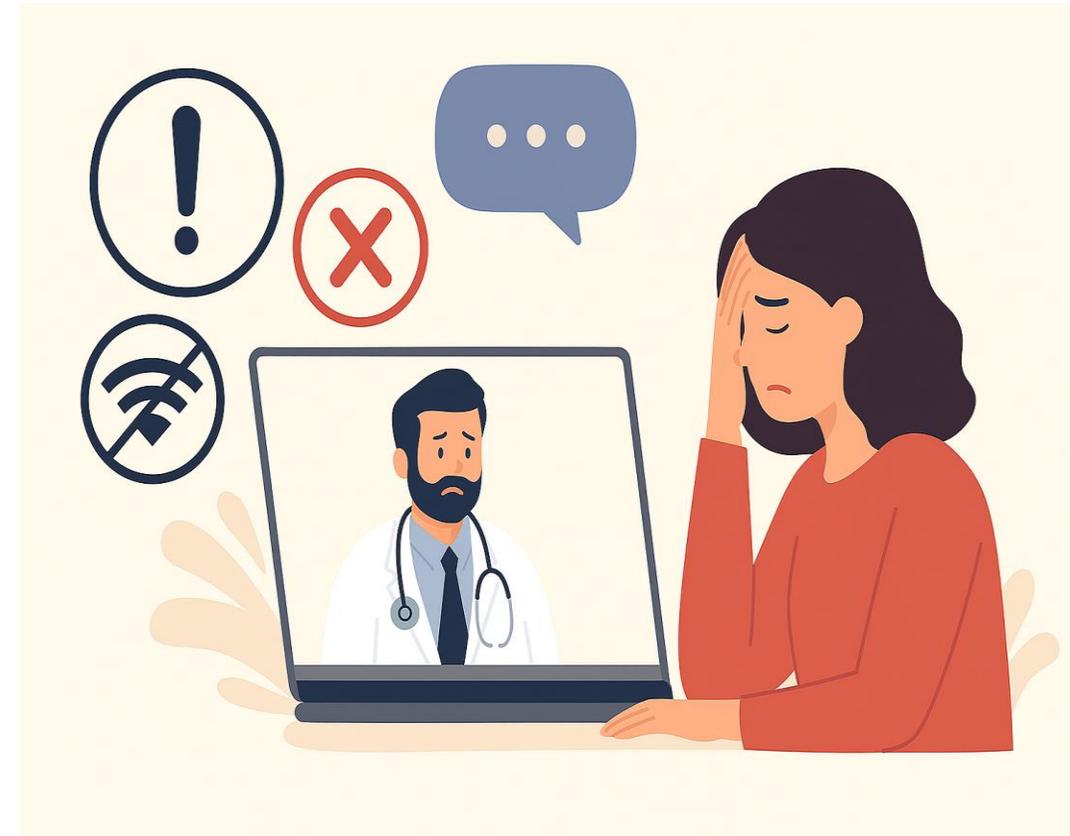
- Improved access (e.g. flexible scheduling, saves time, and reduce cost)
- Privacy concern (e.g. offers a sense of anonymity)
- Reduce stigma and fear of attending in-person care (Wooley et al., 2024; Sugarman et al., 2021; King et al., 2009).



# Effectiveness and Barriers

Common barriers include:

- Difficulty in building therapeutic rapport and trust
- Digital exclusion (e.g., limited digital access, low digital literacy, poor connectivity) (Wooley et al., 2024; King et al., 2009)
- Limited research on client-specific feedback and preferences



# Aim

To explore clients' perspectives on the benefits and drawbacks of accessing AOD counselling via telehealth, informed by their experiences with both telehealth and face-to-face delivery.

# Methods

- Participants were 22 clients who had received AOD counselling via telehealth and face-to-face within the past 12 months
- Recruited via service providers, Peaks, social media
- Convenience sampling between August and November 2024
- Semi-structured interviews via Microsoft Teams or phone
- Analysed thematically using NVivo 12

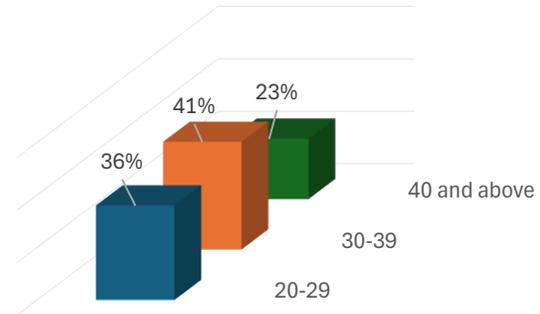
# Findings



50%



41%



**Metropolitan**



**Regional**



# Findings

## Theme 1: Telehealth increases clients' confidence to engage in counselling

It enable clients to engage from the comfort of their own home, provide a sense of control, reducing their fear of stigma and limiting social anxiety.

*“The sessions actually provide a comfortable and a private environment. So, I just saw that as something I could actually benefit from because it could keep me at a very calm place to you know, be able to access the service easily”*

# Findings

## **Theme 2: Telehealth provides a reduced sense of human connection compared to face-to-face counselling**

- Difficulty building strong rapport
- Difficulties in understanding communication nuances (e.g. facial or bodily cues)
- A professional biography and photo
- A blended approach can help to feel more connected

*“I find the face-to-face interactions much more effective. I think that she can, that she's very good at reading my body language....”*

*“I had difficulty opening up unless I see them face-to-face at least once because I had this phobia of not knowing the person on the end of the phone...”*

# Findings

## Theme 3: Telehealth helps overcome structural barriers to accessing face-to-face counselling

- Greater adaptability and resource efficiency  
(e.g. access from anywhere, reduce travel and wait times, cost effective)
- Clients with complex needs  
(e.g. mobility challenges, living in regional areas)
- Technical difficulties  
(e.g. unstable internet, device malfunctions, low digital literacy)

*“I guess for me it was tricky to sort of engage in any sort of counselling being where I live in a sort of a large rural city [...] I was not driving at the time, I didn't have a license back yet, so transport was a bit of an issue, it would take me an hour and a half to get somewhere for an appointment...”*

# Findings

## Theme 4: Trust in counsellors can overcome concerns about the privacy

- Risk of privacy breaches and potential system vulnerabilities (e.g. Risk of being overheard at home, recorded or hacked)

*“Not everyone will accept [telehealth] because in the first place we do believe there maybe like the scammers, maybe your information will go out or something”*

- Telehealth offers increased anonymity, enhancing perceived privacy compared to in-person sessions

# Findings

## **Theme 5: Increased awareness of telehealth would support client choice**

- Knowledge of telehealth options and access points  
(e.g. Navigating websites, booking systems, service information)
- Promote privacy protection in telehealth
- Promotion of AOD counselling services

*“I think having that assurance [.....] would be huge in boosting people's morale to engage in phone counselling [...] I think having it on public places like the website [would help].”*

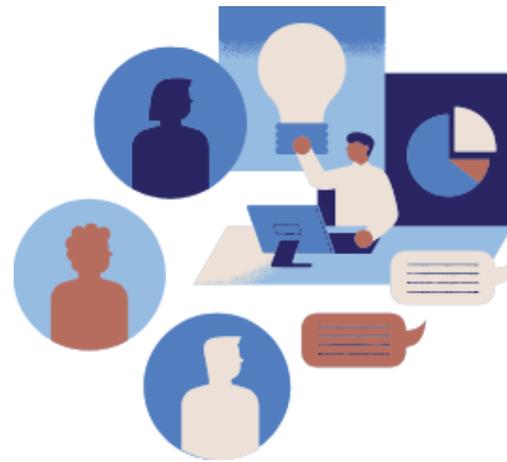
# Discussion

- Telehealth offered accessible, flexible care despite some trade-offs
- Being familiar with the settings reduced stigma and support engagement
- Beneficial for under-served and hard-to-reach groups
- Limitation: Regional clients were underrepresented in this study, who face more complexities while gain more from telehealth

# Policy implications



Invest in staff training



Seek clients' feedback



Ensure platform security

# References

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## **NCETA project team**

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## **Project reference group**

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- Nicole Lee, Hello Sunday Morning
- Scott Wilson, ADAC

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# Thank you for your time and attention

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