

Alcohol and other drug treatment clients' experiences of telehealth during the COVID-19 pandemic

RACHEL PETUKHOVA^{1,2}, ANTHONY BARNETT^{1,2}, MICHAEL SAVIC^{1,2}, JAIMIE WOOLLEY^{1,3}, VICTORIA MANNING^{1,2}

¹Turning Point, Eastern Health, Melbourne, Australia, ²Monash Addiction Research Centre, Eastern Health Clinical School, Monash University, Melbourne, Australia, ³School of Psychological Sciences, Monash University, Melbourne, Australia

Presenter's email: <rachel.petukhova@monash.edu>

Introduction / Issues: COVID-19 social distancing measures led to the rapid uptake of telehealth, the delivery of care via telephone or video-conferencing, throughout Australia's healthcare system. Whilst clients' experiences of telehealth within healthcare generally have been extensively researched, little is known about how alcohol and other drug (AOD) clients have experienced the switch to telehealth during the pandemic. For instance, it is unclear how AOD treatment access and the therapeutic relationship have been impacted by the transition to telehealth in AOD treatment. The current study aimed to explore the benefits and challenges associated with telehealth and understand AOD client perspectives on the role of telehealth in the future.

Method / Approach: Twenty participants were recruited from Victorian AOD treatment services and completed in-depth semi-structured interviews. Interviews were subjected to thematic analysis, in which common themes as well as sub-themes were identified.

Key Findings: Participants experienced telehealth as a convenient and accessible treatment modality and felt that the level of care was often comparable to in-person care. However, participants recognised that they sometimes found it difficult to establish rapport and convey non-verbal cues via telehealth (particularly via telephone rather than video conferencing). Most participants endorsed a future hybrid model where AOD clients can choose their mode of treatment delivery based on their needs and desires.

Discussions and Conclusions: Participants shared unique perspectives concerning telehealth for AOD treatment. While participants reported challenges and benefits associated with telehealth, most felt that telehealth could be incorporated into future AOD treatment via a hybrid model.

Implications for Practice or Policy: This research may inform improvements to the accessibility and experience of telehealth delivery and future telehealth training for AOD professionals to support them to deliver quality care. It highlights the potential value of the telehealth modality during and beyond crises like the COVID-19 pandemic.

Disclosure of Interest Statement: This research is funded by the Victorian Department of Health.