

Clients' perspectives on accessing alcohol and other drug counselling via telehealth

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Introduction: Telehealth – or service delivery via phone or video - has the potential to offer benefits for clients of alcohol and other drug (AOD) counselling services such as increased access and convenience. However, it may also have limitations in terms of establishing a therapeutic relationship with counsellors or challenges such as technical difficulties or privacy concerns. Little is known outside of the context of COVID-19 restrictions regarding client preferences for different modes of accessing counselling. This study aimed to explore clients' views on the benefits and drawbacks of accessing AOD counselling via telehealth in comparison to face-to-face.

Methods: This qualitative study involved semi-structured interviews with 22 Australians who had received AOD counselling services via telehealth and face-to-face within the past 12 months. Data were analysed using an inductive thematic approach.

Key Findings: All participants indicated that they would be willing to access AOD counselling via telehealth again in the future, although they varied in their preference for telehealth or face-to-face counselling. Participants' discussion of preferences reflected five themes: (i) telehealth can increase confidence to engage in counselling, (ii) telehealth can reduce human connection, (iii) telehealth helps to overcome barriers to accessing counselling, (iv) trust in counsellors can help overcome privacy concerns, and (v) increasing awareness of telehealth can support client choice.

Discussions and Conclusions: Despite acknowledging both benefits and drawbacks to accessing AOD counselling via telehealth, participants indicated that having telehealth available as an option for counselling was important to support client-centred care.

Implications for Practice or Policy: To effectively respond to client preferences, service providers may need to invest in clinician training and systems development to ensure that they can provide safe, secure, and effective counselling via telehealth.

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