

Expanding access to addiction medicine specialist care in regional NSW through telehealth

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Introduction: Australians in regional areas face substantial barriers accessing Alcohol and Other Drug (AOD) specialist medical care. Fly-in fly-out (FIFO) services can reduce access barriers, however the high cost of FIFO services limits their availability. Delivering AOD specialist medical care via telehealth could help overcome access barriers. This study examined whether telehealth improved availability and reduced costs of AOD specialist medical care across two local health districts (LHDs) in regional NSW (Murrumbidgee (MLHD) and Western NSW (WNSWLHD)).

Method: A central coordinating service (St Vincent's Hospital Sydney) provided additional (MLHD) or FIFO-replacement (WNSWLHD) telehealth consultations by addiction medicine specialists. A "shared care" approach was employed; LHDs facilitated access to consultations and provided local clinical input including in-person support from a registered nurse during telehealth consultations. Interrupted time series analysis was used to examine change in appointment numbers pre-and-post telehealth implementation (implemented late-2019/early-2021). Mean costs were compared using independent t-tests. Qualitative interviews assessing acceptability were conducted with staff and clients.

Key Findings: Following telehealth implementation, AOD specialist appointments delivered within MLHD increased ($z = 3.85$), while no change was observed at WNSWLHD ($z = 0.52$). Cost per consultation was lower with both telehealth models ($p < .001$). Qualitatively, telehealth helped to reduce client anxiety and increased service accessibility.

Discussion and Conclusions: Findings suggest that AOD specialist medical care delivered by telehealth is feasible, acceptable, and provides cost advantages compared to FIFO services. Future research examining treatment efficacy of this model is warranted.

Implications for Practice or Policy: Telemedicine is a feasible service delivery option to enhance existing services and expand regional access to AOD care.

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