

Can Virtual Medical Care Offer Pandemic Relief?

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As Canadians adapt to virtual family dinners and online classrooms, another technology, virtual healthcare, is quietly making its way into the mainstream. Public health authorities have been using electronic tools, such as telephone screening, to prioritize coronavirus testing; however, the concept has other important uses, including taking pressure off public health resources, extending access to care for routine health needs and keeping remote employees healthy and productive.

Some provinces have offered telemedicine for almost 20 years, but the availability of broadband networks and portable video-capable devices extends the virtual care concept to allow healthcare practitioners of all types to offer consultation, diagnosis, treatment, follow-up and counselling. Last year, Canadians had more than two-million virtual visits with clinicians,^[1] and downloaded thousands of health and wellness apps.

Relieving pressure

As health resources focus on pandemic response, virtual care can help reduce the pressure on an already stretched system. Meaghan Kappel, a director in PWC Canada's M&A Strategy practice who focuses on technology and healthcare, observes that "virtual care is key in getting people to stay home instead of ending up in crowded clinics and emergency rooms. It allows them to do their part to stop the spread of the disease while still feeling they're being treated, whether for the COVID-19 virus or another condition."

Kappel also notes that virtual care offers medical professionals who are not on the frontlines a chance to contribute to the coronavirus response, while they test drive new tools. "Many doctors and registered nurses were unsure about virtual care before, but now they're seeing how the model can work and they're seeing there is consumer demand for it." In fact, a 2019

study by Medisys shows that 69% of Canadians would use virtual care if office visits were inconvenient.^[2]

Bridging the gap

For the 4.5-million Canadians who don't have a family physician, other forms of virtual care, such as [Akira by TELUS Health](#), can connect them 24 hours a day to a clinician who can help with physical and mental health concerns, referrals and more.

Mobile apps are another key way to deliver care and resources directly to Canadians. A 2018 study found more than 300,000 healthcare apps available worldwide.^[3] Kappel says the situation for consumers is a lot less confusing these days. "There's been a lot of consolidation in the virtual care and app space, with some very strong players, including [Akira](#) as an emerging leader."

Meditation and mindfulness apps are also finding increased use as employees look for accessible tools to help manage stress and anxiety.^[3]

Employers take note

In a previous article, we discussed the ways in which virtual care can [give employers a competitive advantage](#). In today's uncertain times, it can also provide much-needed support to an anxious workforce.

Despite improved access to care, high consumer demand and benefits to the public health system, only 9% of Canadian employers offer virtual care to their employees.^[2] Now is a good time to consider adding it to their overall benefits offering.

While more than 90% of employers are encouraging their workforce to use employee assistance programs (EAPs) for support,^[4] studies show that only about 10% of workers take advantage of these programs,^[2] versus 71% who say they would be willing to trade other benefits for access to virtual care.^[2]

Prior to the COVID-19 crisis, mental health issues were costing employers over \$6-billion a year in lost productivity. Given the ongoing uncertainty about when and how the situation will end, it's likely that even more Canadians are struggling with anxiety and depression, yet 40% may never seek help.^[5]

Virtual access to experienced clinicians, along with online follow up and the use of cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) apps offer a way to give employees convenient, private and effective support for managing stress and other mental health and addiction challenges—now and when the situation eases. You can [read more here](#) about how employers are prioritizing mental wellness during the coronavirus crisis.

“I’m excited to see where we end up after the current crisis,” Kappel says. “There is so much opportunity to open up virtual care to a broader range of health industry players so we can begin tackling chronic disease prevention, access to care and treating vulnerable populations.”

While employers and employees learn to navigate in the current climate of uncertainty, there are opportunities to look to alternative health and wellness delivery models that can support employees, reduce pressure on public front-line healthcare providers and create a healthy, resilient workforce to meet the challenges ahead.

[1] Canada Health Infoway, March 2020. Digital Health and COVID-19

[2] Medisys Health Group, 2019. Virtual healthcare in Canada: The solution at our fingertips

[3] Liquid State, 2018. 4 digital health app trends to consider for 2018.

[4] Employee Benefit News, 2020. Mental health and telehealth apps come of age amid coronavirus crisis.

[5] Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, 2018. The mental health and well-being of Ontario students