

## Telemedicine in Primary Care

*Last Updated: December 2014*

### Doctors of BC Position

- Doctors of BC recognises the benefits of telemedicine as a complementary tool for primary care physicians where its use supports the following principles of enhanced primary care:
  - Quality patient-centred care based on a strong physician-patient relationship.
  - Continuity of care over time.
  - Comprehensive care for most health needs.
  - Coordination of care when it must be sought elsewhere.
- To ensure the optimal use of telemedicine services in British Columbia's primary health care system, Doctors of BC recommends:
  - Provincial primary care telemedicine investments, policy or regulation support comprehensive, continuous patient-centred care in alignment with the principles above.
  - Robust evaluation of telemedicine services to continually monitor quality and improve services for patients and providers, and curtail use where/if it detracts from the physician-patient relationship and the principles of enhanced primary care.
  - Primary care physicians who use telemedicine services:
    - consult the College of Physicians and Surgeons of BC's Professional Standards and Guidelines on Telemedicine, and
    - be supported to pursue continuing education on best practices for telemedicine to increase understanding of the opportunities and limitations of telemedicine in the clinical context.

### Background

Telemedicine is the provision of medical expertise for the purpose of diagnosis and patient care by means of telecommunications and information technology where the patient and provider are separated by distance [1]. Telemedicine services can be delivered in 'real time' (e.g. videoconferencing, telephone) or through 'store and forward' technology (e.g. e-mail, text message, digital image transmission). The term 'telemedicine' is often used interchangeably with 'telehealth', although the latter generally covers a broad range of applications, including tele-education, and is used in relation to a range of health care providers. For the purpose of this policy, Doctors of BC uses the term 'telemedicine' as this is more applicable to physician-patient encounters.

Both primary care physicians and specialists in British Columbia are able to provide a range of telemedicine services directly to patients and, since 2011, have not

been restricted to using specific platforms, networks, or telemedicine facilities. The physician is personally responsible for the confidentiality and security of all records and transmissions if they choose to practice telemedicine outside an approved health authority site. Telemedicine outside an approved site is rare in Canada, with the majority of provinces and territories placing restrictions on when and how physicians provide telemedicine services.

Primary care physicians in BC are successfully using a variety of telemedicine modalities in ways that are consistent with the principles of enhanced primary care. A recent rapid increase in utilization of general practice videoconferencing services in particular has prompted a Ministry of Health review of telemedicine services in BC. Doctors of BC aims to provide direction to policy-makers that reflects the physician perspective on the provision of

telemedicine services generally in the primary care setting.

## Analysis

In 2011, Canada Health Infoway commissioned a pan-Canadian study of the use of telehealth and telemedicine technology and the evidence of benefits achieved to date. [3] Benefits identified in the report fall under the categories of access to care, quality of care, and productivity. In particular, the report notes that telemedicine can:

- Enhance patient-centred care through the provision of more convenient services, saving patients time and reducing travel costs.
- Support better chronic disease management.
- Improve care coordination.
- Reduce avoidable health system utilization.
- Increase productivity by allowing clinicians to provide more consultations.

Doctors of BC recognizes that there are very real benefits to the application of telemedicine in primary care, particularly in rural, remote, and other underserved areas of the province. However, telemedicine also has the potential to result in fragmented and episodic care. It is therefore important that the use of telemedicine services, and any primary care telemedicine investments, policy or regulation, support the principles of enhanced primary care.

In 2007, the British Columbia Ministry of Health co-developed a Primary Health Care Charter [4] with a number of stakeholders, including Doctors of BC. That Charter refers to important features of primary care being: first contact access; long-term person-focused care; comprehensive care; and coordinated care when it must be sought elsewhere. The Charter also states that primary care patients should receive accessible, appropriate, efficient, effective, safe quality care at the right time in the right setting by the right provider.

These are well-established principles of enhanced primary care, and align well with the principles of family medicine supported by the College of Family Physicians of Canada. The College emphasizes the importance of family physicians providing continuing care to their patients and states that repeated contacts with patients build on the patient-physician relationship [5].

The General Practice Services Committee, a collaboration between Doctors of BC and the Ministry of

Health, also supports the principles of enhanced primary care, with its mandate including: “enhancing comprehensive and continuous care and improving coordination and quality of care to family practice patients in British Columbia” [6].

Doctors of BC considers that general practice telemedicine services are best delivered in the context of the enhanced primary care model and, to ensure the optimal use of telemedicine services in British Columbia, is making a number of recommendations.

In addition to recommending that primary care telemedicine investments, policy or regulation support the principles of enhanced primary care, Doctors of BC recommends ongoing tracking and evaluation of telemedicine services to monitor quality and improve services for patients and providers.

Physicians who use telemedicine services should consult the College of Physicians and Surgeons of BC’s Professional Standards and Guidelines on Telemedicine. These cover a range of issues including privacy, security, informed consent, and the importance of explaining the appropriateness and limitations of telemedicine.

Finally, Doctors of BC also recommends that primary care physicians be supported to pursue continuing education on best practices for telemedicine to increase understanding of the opportunities and limitations of telemedicine in the clinical context.

## References

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