Telehealth in the Home: Rehabilitation, aged and palliative care in South Australia

An SA Health partnership investigating online, at-home support for patients and their carers; a team approach integrating general practitioners, aged care and specialist clinical services.

The project aims to:

• increase access to team care, enhance the patient and carer experience in local communities
• provide increased access to specialist clinical services
• prevent admissions
• improve existing and develop new clinical pathways
• integrate health services for improved health outcomes

For patients
Telehealth in the home provides increased care and access to intervention when needed. A specialist team approach is made possible, in the comfort of the patient’s own home.

For providers
Telehealth applications increase capacity for clinical care, enabling more patients to receive attention. Responsiveness is increased with monitoring in real time and without travel delay.

A South Australian telehealth in the home system

Using tablet-based telehealth applications, participants and carers actively engage in their care and routinely use the iPads for self-reporting current health data. Patients report feeling more connected to the clinician when using videoconferencing in comparison to telephone.

Health care providers can review more patients, assessments are more focused and are targeted to the symptom assessment scores the patient has entered from home. Therapists and nurses have a reduced need to travel to patients’ homes on a regular basis.

Functional health status is monitored remotely in a way that facilitates the proactive engagement of the patients, specialist care and GP services. Management and follow-up on alerts, triggered by functional decline or symptom escalation, can be rapidly addressed by means of videoconference to the participants & carers in their own homes.

Patients benefit from and participate as appropriate in multidisciplinary case conferences with a geriatrician, rehabilitation physician, palliative medicine specialist, palliative specialist nurse, allied health clinician and GP.

Specific standalone applications can support rehabilitation. For instance, exercises can be provided online for patients at home to undertake in the home at regular intervals, speech pathology can delivered remotely.

Rural nursing home residents have greater access to metropolitan specialist, medical and allied health assessments and staff have more opportunities to extend their knowledge through interactions with specialists.
Meeting the challenges of Telehealth in the Home

Implementing telehealth will challenge some business processes and clinical pathways, in order to effectively provide telehealth in the home and as a result of clinical care pathway improvements.

Improved pathways and technical support

Specific quality of care and service criteria will need to be developed to ensure the safe and efficient delivery of healthcare in the home using telehealth.

The technology required to support telehealth will vary between services. For instance the monitoring of palliative care patients will be different to that of rehabilitation patients.

Interconnectivity and interoperability between the home and existing SA Health services, networks and applications will underpin the efficiency of telehealth services, as will that between SA Health services.

The technical support embedded in clinical teams could be drawn upon to enable customisation of services to the home environment and the type of clinical service being delivered.

Services to the home depend on the availability of consumer level internet services, as well as the deployment, maintenance and support of mobile devices such as tablets and will require consumer awareness and access.

New opportunities exist to develop applications that support home health care assessment or self-care could be developed with alignment to electronic medical record systems or personal electronic health records, creating greater efficiencies and mitigating risks.

By its conclusion, the Telehealth in the Home pilot project will provide:

- an assessment of whether access to rehabilitation and palliative care health services was increased
- identification of health system outcomes such as any reduction in health related transport costs or number of hospitalisations/ hospitalisation rates
- suggestions for scaling and sustaining the services beyond June 2014
- estimate of costs to scale and maintain the Service
- governance arrangements required for the Service to support its ongoing operation

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