Your guide to best-practice telehealth set-up

The rise of telehealth

When lockdown occurred, telehealth adoption and expansion happened quickly. A great deal of evidence points to a continuation of the trend. Learn more about the digital evolution and what you can do to ready your practice.

In the past, telehealth consultations were largely used for patients in rural and remote areas. But when COVID-19 struck, phone and video conferencing came into its own. Moreover, says Andy Hurt, Managing Director of global communications and collaboration solutions provider Poly, "telehealth allows practitioners to become more productive. Without having to travel to various locations, they are able to see more patients."

Of course, telehealth will never fully replace face-to-face consultations, however, where it is appropriate, it is important that the right tools, technology and training are in place for healthcare providers, patients and their carers.

Government response to COVID-19

- **March 2020**

  ### $2.4 billion
  the size of the Federal Government's health package to help combat COVID-19.[1]

  ### 1.3 million
  telehealth consultations delivered.[2]

- **April 2020**

  ### >250
  'temporary' telehealth items added to the Medicare Benefits Schedule.[3]

  ### >4.3 million
  medical services delivered to 3 million patients.[4]

Interestingly, videoconferencing take-up pales compared to telephone consultations, with the biggest barriers being confidence of medical practitioners and allied health professionals in tools and technology and digital literacy.[5]

40% What proportion of consultations GPs estimate can be done remotely.[6]

**99%** of GPs now offer telehealth services.[7]

A behavioural change survey commissioned by nbn[8] revealed:

48% of respondents visited their GP in the past two months did so via phone or video.

63% of respondents are open to considering using telehealth in the future.

The number of **over 65s** accessing telehealth services **doubled from 1 in 8 (13%) to 1 in 4 (27%).**

25-34 the demographic most open to accessing telehealth services.
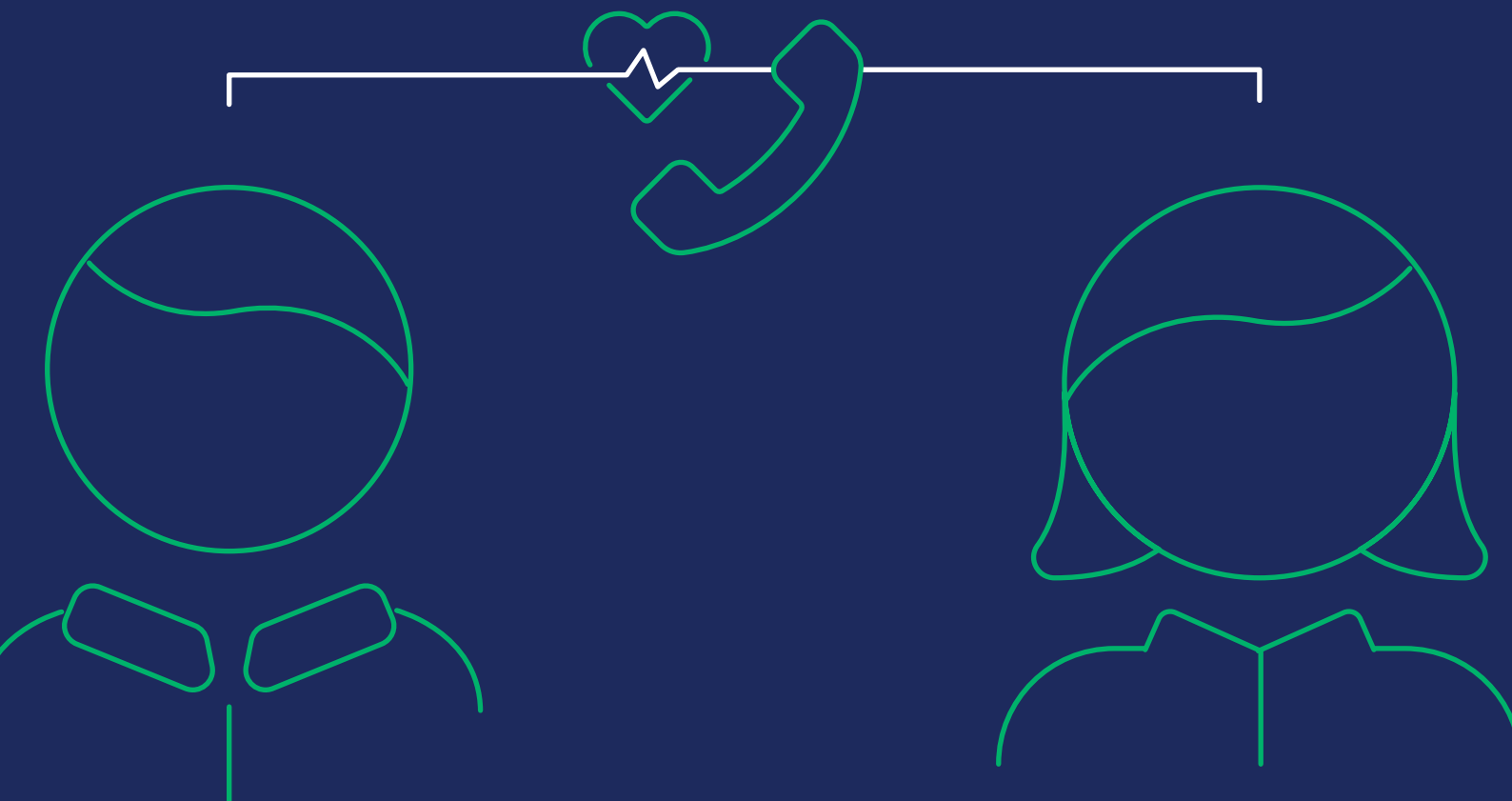
How to set up a remote consultation space

Your remote consultation space can take many forms – from a repurposed community hall to purpose-built telehealth rooms and even your patient's home. Here are some tips on how to best manage the consultation space at the patient's end.
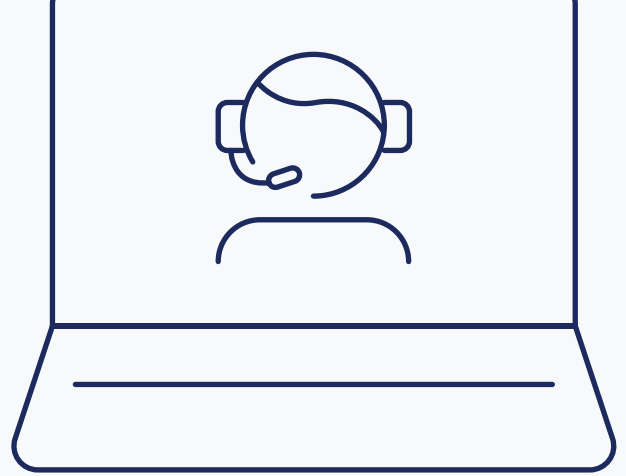
1

Lighting

- Make sure the lighting allows you to see your patient clearly. If your patient is in their home, ask them to adjust their position in the room, or the position of the light, if required.

- Optimal light placement includes a diffused light source in front of your patient. The light should shine diagonally toward them. This will reduce facial shadows and optimise accurate colour transmission.

- Rooms with windows should have shades or blinds to control the light. If your patient is at home, ask them to close these.

2

Room size and equipment

Room size obviously depends on the service being provided and the type and size of equipment being used. If the telehealth service will be conducted from a designated telehealth consultation space, there should be enough room for:

- any specialised equipment

- the patient to sit in a chair and use the examination table (assuming a remote health practitioner is there to assist)

- telehealth practitioners to conduct a thorough consultation, e.g. assess gait.

- staff, consultants and carers to move around the room if need be.

3

Acoustics

Be aware that high ceilings and hard floor surfaces can cause acoustic difficulties. Clinics with a focus on telehealth are encouraged, where possible, to deploy materials and furnishings to absorb sound. This can involve carpet or rubber floors, draperies and upholstered furniture, although their use needs to be reviewed in the context of infection-control risks associated with specific spaces.[10]

4

Privacy

Patients require a safe and undisturbed space to speak freely and help providers assess their situation. Ensure your patient is in a quiet, private and undisturbed space.[9]

5

Wall colour

Wall colour impacts how patients look on video. For example, white walls can make faces look darker. If you have the option, light blues and greys work best.

Technical considerations

To deliver virtual consultations through phone and video-conferencing, you will need:

A high-quality webcam. The webcam should be positioned at the top of the screen, so you can maintain eye contact.[11] A webcam at the remote site with inbuilt pan and tilt capabilities can provide enhanced control.

A high-quality microphone (built-in or external) with noise-cancelling properties.

Fast business-grade internet connection that is designed to ensure more consistent data for both upload and download speeds to help reduce the chance of drop-outs or delays that could impact the video or audio quality. See overleaf for more information on symmetry.

Appropriate video software [see below].

Consumer-grade vs business or enterprise-grade video

Unfortunately, there are some situations where consumer-grade products simply aren't built for the needs of telehealth. Audio drop-outs, video that freezes or lags – these have a large impact on the patient experience.

Poly's Hurt adds, "Enterprise-grade devices are set to play a bigger part in providing quality care than ever before. Using quality headsets and video conferencing cameras will elevate the overall experience during remote consultations, counselling and routine check-ups."

"

"HD video and audio conferencing provides the superior communication quality needed by medical professionals for interactive patient care."

Andy Hurt, Managing Director, Poly, Australia and New Zealand

The right connectivity

"Interruptions to audio and video during a telehealth consultation mean inferior patient experience, increased risk of misdiagnosis, and a barrier to willingness to engage in future telehealth consultations," says Jen Beer, **nbn**'s Head of Segment – Health, Regional & Remote." Good connectivity, she adds, is crucial.

Speed and symmetrical data

Voice and video are particularly susceptible to delays and lags if an internet connection is not designed to support the unique needs of these video and voice applications, but it is not as simple as just getting a fast connection.

Standard network connections are usually based primarily on "best-effort" network connections that are subject to slower speeds when the network is congested.

In comparison, some business-grade network solutions can offer committed information rates and prioritised data channels for applications where quality of service is essential.

The RACP suggests that practices conducting a large number of consultations could consider installing a separate internet connection specifically for telehealth.[11]

Symmetry should also be a focus. While internet connections used to be judged on download speeds, the rise of voice, video applications, which rely on an even transmission of upload and download for quality performance, mean upload speeds are now just as important.
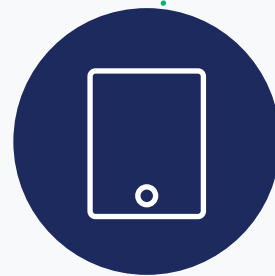
Choosing the right software

The software used for video conferences should be safe, secure and effective.[9] There is specialised telehealth software available, as well as (non-medical) video conferencing software such as Skype, Webex, Teams or Zoom.

That said, Skype, for example, is optimised for point-to-point voice and video calls, while specialised software is usually optimised for multi-point calls.[12]

The main difference between specialised and point-to-point software is the level of security encryption, an important consideration when it comes to security of data.

Trusted software options

The Australian Digital Health Agency has compiled a helpful Register of Conformity which lists software that conforms with national telehealth requirements. Features of conforming software include the ability to view a My Health Record, upload shared health summaries and prescriptions, and more.

Things to consider when selecting software

- The patient/client has minimal or no set-up costs.
- It's simple for patients/clients to install and use.
- You can share screens if necessary.

- It's encrypted for greater security.
- Audio/video is high quality and reliable.
- Allows multiple people to join from multiple locations.

Patient privacy and technical support

Protecting patient data

Video consultations are subject to the same privacy and confidentiality standards and Government legislation as face-to-face consultations.[9]

Further, data transfer must comply with the Australian Privacy Principle 11.
Most specialised video conferencing software uses encryption during transmission, so the risk of hacking is minimal.[14]

However, the Australian College of Rural & Remote Medicine recommends healthcare providers do not use the file transfer or text chat features of software such as Skype, WhatsApp or Facetime because they are more vulnerable to security breaches.[15]

Technical support and troubleshooting

At some point, you, your patient/client or a specialist with whom you are collaborating might experience technical difficulties.

Always ensure you:

• can access technical support

• have a Plan B, e.g. if something goes wrong with the video connection or conferencing equipment, make sure you have a phone handy at both ends

• keep teleconferencing troubleshooting guides within arm's reach

• assign responsibility for technical support to one of your staff. If you do not have technical expertise in-house it may be a good idea to find a ICT consultant/partner who can assist provide assistance and diagnose technical issues if they were to arise.

" "Now, more than ever, it's important to ensure people who work in healthcare are equipped to recognise and manage security risks."

Australian Digital Health Agency

Case study:
Therapy Connect

One person who's no stranger to telehealth is Simone Dudley, co-founder of Therapy Connect.

"Telehealth has been a vital element of healthcare for rural and regional Australians for many years," says Dudley. "I've run a telehealth practice for six years, providing thousands of hours of speech and occupational therapy, psychology and physiotherapy supports to children and families living all over Australia via the **nbn**™ network. The reality is, many of our clients wouldn't have access to various forms of therapy and other healthcare practices without telehealth services.

"Over recent months I have noticed the confidence in telehealth services from clients growing, as they realise they can still receive the highest quality treatment. I anticipate people will continue to use telehealth services, particularly as more practitioners begin to offer the service."
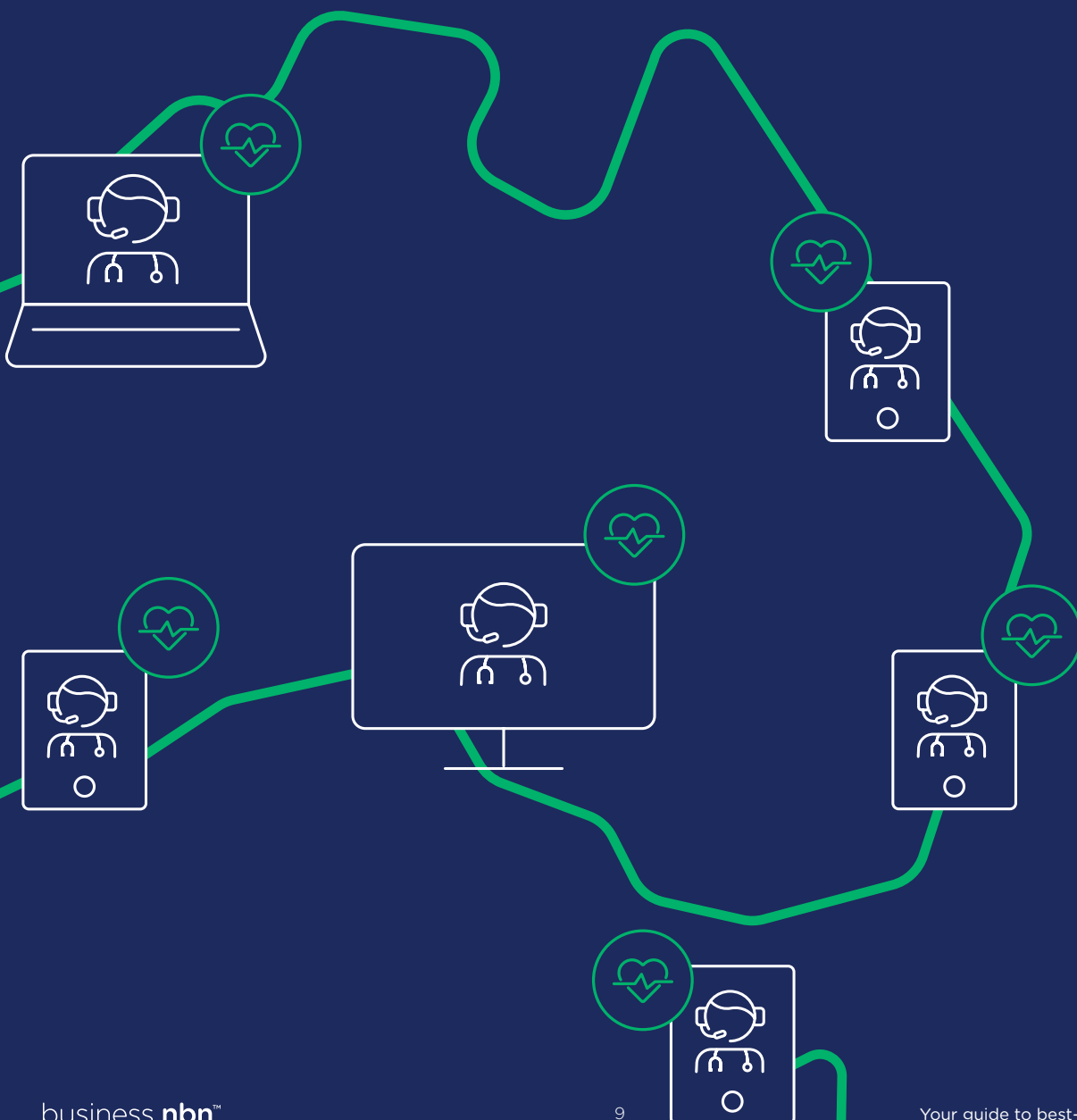
Video consultation checklist

The preparation and set-up for conducting video consultations will vary across different health providers but below are some fundamentals to consider.[9,16]

Considerations

- Determine clinical appropriateness

- Check with professional indemnity insurer about telehealth consultations

- Ensure you have an appropriate workspace

- Ensure you have the technical equipment needed and way to help patients troubleshoot any difficulties they have

- Review your current policies, procedures and risk management protocols

- Establish protocols for obtaining and recording patient consent
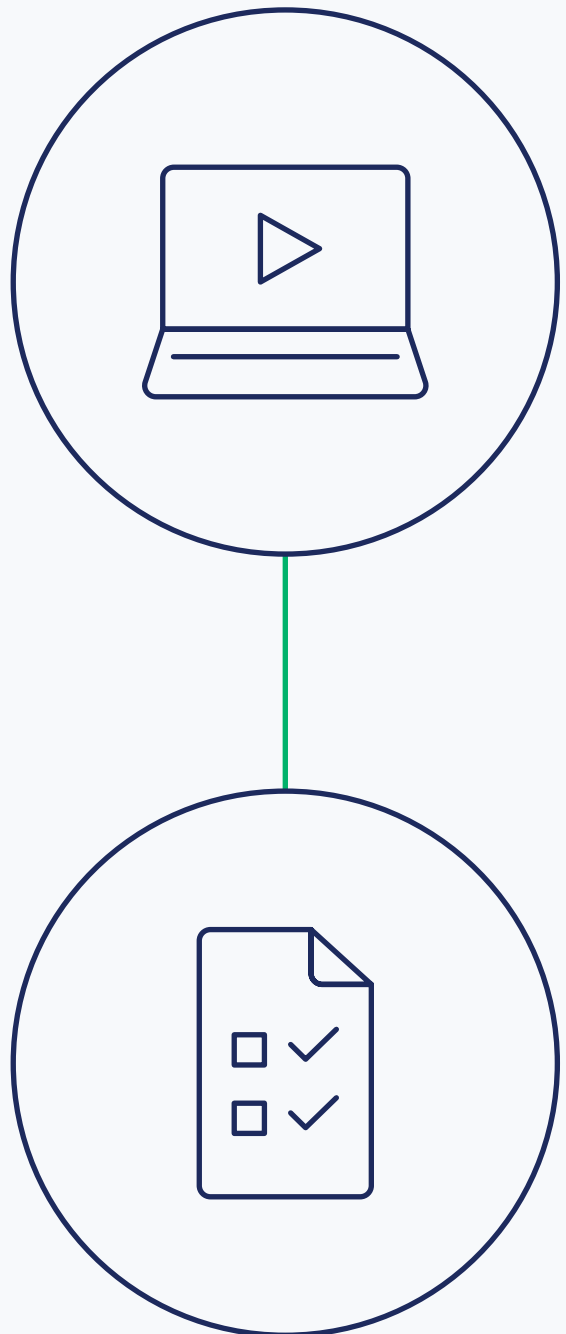
For more on staying on track in these disrupted times, visit the **Australian Business Continuity website**.

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