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Conference Abstract

Telehealth as a tool for integration; results from a qualitative study of Australian telehealth services

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Abstract

Introduction: Telehealth is the delivery of health care at a distance using information and communications technology. It has the potential to increase communication and integration between patients, health care providers and health care organisations, but uptake in Australian has been small scale, and the impact of telehealth on service integration has received little attention.

Methods: A qualitative study was conducted, in which semi-structured interviews were carried out with clinicians, managers and researchers who developed or were operating telehealth services in Australia.

Results: 42 semi-structured interviews were completed, concerning 39 distinct telehealth services. Thematic analysis showed that the use of telehealth increased communication, and stimulated the development of cooperation and coordination between services, particularly through the development of networks. Increased continuity of care and having more information about patients was reported to lead to improved clinical decision making. A minority of the telehealth services constructed new models of care with substantially greater integration and case studies of these will be presented. One of the difficulties of implementing telehealth was found to be that it exposed current lack of integration and this had to be addressed in order for telehealth services to be able to operate.

Discussion and Conclusions: Telehealth is a complex and disruptive innovation in health care. It both supports health services integration, and requires integration in order to be effective.

Lessons learned: In order to use telehealth as an integrative tool, the development of telehealth needs to be conducted in tandem with whole of service development.

Limitations: The study was limited to the Australian context and by the collection of data from just one or two individuals per service. The environment in this field is changing rapidly and ongoing longitudinal research is needed.

Suggestions for future research: The expansion of telehealth directly to patients at home has the potential to transform the engagement of patients with health care and should also be investigated for the potential it offers to increase systemic integration.

Keywords

telehealth; qualitative research; service integration

PowerPoint presentation

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