



### **Telehealth 101: tips and tricks from our members**

During GP22: the Conference for General Practice, over 40 members who've become comfortable with telehealth attended a workshop to share their tips and tricks about how to use telehealth effectively. The aim was to understand what those specialist GPs did to make telehealth consultations better and then share that with the rest of the membership.

This is what we learnt:

#### **Your set up**

Having a clear and uncluttered area to work from can help your patients focus on you during a video call. Good lighting makes all the difference and watch out for windows as the sun can overpower the lights in your office.

Having two computer screens is helpful and means you can keep the patient on one and have your notes, resources, and records on the other.

Different computers and laptops come with better or worse cameras and microphones. Do a test call with a colleague to check that your equipment is up to your standards and, if not, have a look at other webcams and microphones that are available.

Putting your camera just above the patient's video makes it easier to have eye contact, rather than always seeming like you're looking off to one side.

Investing in software is good too – the free versions of some packages offer a poor experience for your patient and it's worth putting some money into it if telehealth is going to be used regularly

Think about how and when you want to do telehealth. Some members prefer:

- Having a dedicated time in a day so they could do several telehealth consults in a row.
- Mixing up in-person and telehealth consults throughout the day.
- Blocking out time each day so that if a telehealth consult ends with the patient needing to come in, there is time available for them to do so.

Reflect on your own experience of telehealth as a patient. Have you tried it? What did you like or not like?

### **Before the video consultation**

Talk to the people doing triage about how your practice is going to identify which patients can be offered telehealth and who needs to come in to see someone. It won't be perfect, but it can make a real difference.

Is it clear to the patient whether they are going to be charged for a video consultation? Do you have a policy for what you will charge if it turns out the person needs to come into the practice?

Would an interpreter be useful? Your practice may use an official service, or your patient may have family members who can help overcome language barriers.

Patient portals can be a great way of securely getting information from the patient before the consultation, like a photo of a rash or recording of a child's cough. You can do this with email too, but be careful around security, privacy, and how that information is stored against the patient's records.

Sending the patient an appointment reminder and explaining that they need to get ready in a suitable private space can save time in the long run.

Have a back-up plan for when things go wrong – if the video call drops out do you want them to try again or will you give them a call on their preferred phone number? Do you have their phone number?

Make sure that your equipment is set up and ready to go, microphone is off mute, you're in good light and, if you're using a phone, prop it up against something rather than holding it in your hand. If you're running late, then let them know if you can. A brief message is always appreciated.

### **Starting a video consultation**

Getting things off to a good start is even more important when you are consulting over a distance. These were some of the top tips:

- Take your mask off and smile!
- Tell them your name and get them to confirm their name (and date of birth/address if you need to confirm identity).
- Check that they are in a private place, ask them if there's anyone else with them and let them know if there's anyone else with you.
- Remind them that this is a video consultation and that if something comes up which means they need to be seen in-person, you'll let them know.
- Confirm that now is a good time to talk and ask them what brings them here today.
- Then listen.

Some members found it useful to write a script and practice it a few times before they started doing telehealth. There's nothing wrong with saying the same thing to every patient – you might get sick of saying it, but your patients will appreciate a friendly and thorough start to their consultation.

Building empathy is different through video consults but the same basics apply:

- Ask them about their day and/or family.
- Pronounce their name correctly – if you don't know, just ask them, they won't mind.
- Keep an eye on video feed showing how you look – are you engaged? Attentive?

### **Finishing a video consultation**

Safety netting and next steps are important – get the patient to reiterate back to you what’s going to happen next if you think they haven’t understood.

OpenNotes can work well here as you can record exactly what you’ve advised, and the patient can refer to those notes.

If you have a health and technology literate patient, then consider sending them links to relevant sites like HealthNavigator if they want to know more about their situation.

After their first video consultation ask them how it went – “was that okay doing this over a video call?” It lets them know you care about the experience and gives them an opportunity to raise any issues.

### **Know your patients**

Over time you will come to recognise whether a patient is comfortable and capable in a telehealth setting. If they aren’t, it can be valuable to take the time to teach them a bit about where to put the phone, how close to be to the camera, what to do if they can’t hear you etc.

Recognise their skills as well. Some patients will be very proficient with the technology and may be able to assist you in examining themselves or taking pictures. Can your patients take their own pulse? Use devices like oximeters? Perform simple checks like shoulder rotations, tap reflexes, or listening to a child’s breathing?

### **And finally**

If telehealth is new for you then be patient with yourself. Like every other part of being a doctor you will learn how you do things best the more you do it. What might seem awkward now will feel completely natural in time.