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Virtual care now key component of healthcare for patients in NSW despite drop in use since pandemic peaks

The Bureau of Health Information (BHI) has released two reports showing how NSW patients are using and experiencing virtual care appointments in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.

BHI Chief Executive Dr Diane Watson said *Healthcare in Focus – Virtual care in NSW: Use and patients’ experiences* shows virtual care (by telephone or video call) has been a fast-changing model of care over the past five years.

“Having expanded rapidly through necessity during the COVID-19 pandemic, virtual care is now embedded as a core component of healthcare delivery in NSW and most patients are providing positive ratings of their experiences,” said Dr Watson.

“However, use of virtual care in NSW has gradually declined from its peak during the pandemic.”

Making up less than 1% of GP and specialist attendances subsidised by the Commonwealth government’s Medicare Benefits Schedule in NSW in 2019, virtual care use peaked in 2021 at 23% (GP attendances) and 16% (specialist attendances) before decreasing to 18% and 9% in 2023, respectively.

BHI Chief Executive Dr Diane Watson said that despite a significant jump in virtual care appointments between 2019 and 2023, there was only a small increase in the total volume of GP and specialist appointments during this period.

“The data tells us that virtual care is now being used largely as an alternative to, rather than as an addition to, in-person care,” said Dr Watson.

Healthcare in Focus also explores around 20,000 patients’ experiences of virtual care services with NSW public hospital outpatient clinics and GPs, including after discharge.

“Most NSW patients had positive experiences with virtual care, and they told us it’s helpful in key areas such as the coordination of their care,” said Dr Watson.

“The report also shows that the more patients used virtual care, the more likely they were to rate their overall virtual care highly; to say they would use virtual care again if given the choice; and to say the care and treatment they received through virtual care helped them.”

While urban patients were higher users of virtual care after discharge from hospital than rural patients, rural patients were more likely to say they would use virtual care again if given the choice.

Virtual Care Survey 2023 results

BHI also released the results of the Virtual Care Survey 2023 today which contribute to *Healthcare in Focus* and reflect the experiences of around 2,300 patients who had at least one virtual care appointment with a public hospital outpatient clinic in NSW in August or September 2023.

Healthcare in Focus – Virtual care in NSW: Use and patients’ experiences and the results of the Virtual Care Survey 2023 are available at bhi.nsw.gov.au

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