



## **Ensuring equitable, sustainable, and quality virtual healthcare for all people in Canada**

### What needs to be done?

Provincial/territorial governments should invest resources to ensure equitable and sustainable access to easy-to-use virtual healthcare for all people in Canada. A concerted effort is required to focus on populations that might face barriers accessing virtual healthcare including seniors, low-income earners, northern/remote communities, newcomers, Indigenous peoples, people with disabilities, people experiencing homelessness and those with low literacy levels. In particular, provincial/territorial governments should:

- 1. Provide sustainable and sufficient funding for communities to ensure access to virtual healthcare is equitable for all people** in Canada with particular focus on systemically marginalized groups. Areas for investment include:
  - Improved broadband internet access and infrastructure.
  - Subsidization of the ongoing costs of internet access.
  - Provision of computers and devices for underserved populations.
  - Creation of safe, accessible, and confidential places where patients can connect with health providers for virtual healthcare.

- 2. Invest resources to enhance virtual healthcare adoption, implementation and research**, in partnership with regional health systems, patient care providers, patient/non-government organizations, academic institutions and funding agencies. It is important to invest in:

- Education and engagement of patients and caregivers on how to access and best utilize virtual healthcare.
- Training and capacity-building for health professionals on how to best adopt and provide patient-centred virtual healthcare, especially for marginalized and Indigenous communities.
- Research and its dissemination to increase understanding about how patients and health providers can best utilize virtual healthcare.

Virtual healthcare has been defined as any interaction between patients and/or one or more members of their health circle of care, occurring remotely, using any forms of communication

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or information technologies with the aim of facilitating or maximizing the quality and effectiveness of patient care.

### **Key virtual healthcare principles encouraged by Heart & Stroke include:**

- Safe and culturally respectful practices.
- Accessible technology.
- Understanding that virtual healthcare complements in-person care but does not replace it.
- Coverage for the full continuum of patient-centred care.
- Ability of regional health systems to operate in conjunction with each other.
- Recognizing under-served communities are a key focus in virtual healthcare development.
- Continuous monitoring and evaluation of outcomes and technologies.

## Why do we need this?

The COVID-19 pandemic has fast tracked the adoption of virtual healthcare,<sup>1,2</sup> however there is still much more improvement needed across the country to facilitate equitable access. The reality is that some population groups continue to face difficulty in accessing healthcare services, including those offered through virtual healthcare.<sup>3-5</sup>

Access to the infrastructure necessary for virtual healthcare and the provision of service is fragmented.<sup>6,7</sup> Rural inhabitants and Indigenous Peoples living on reservations do not have the same access to reliable high-speed internet as those living in urban areas (41% and 31% versus 98% respectively)<sup>8</sup> and have fewer virtual healthcare service centres, which serve as access hubs for those in remote settings.<sup>9</sup>

Financial barriers to virtual healthcare include poor access to and cost of computers or smartphones and high-speed connection for appointments.<sup>10</sup> Telecommunications costs represent 9% of household spending among the lowest income groups in Canada.<sup>8</sup> The difference in cost for internet access in urban and rural regions continues to grow.<sup>8</sup>

Canada lags behind other developed countries such as Sweden and the UK in terms of virtual healthcare utilization in areas such as electronic medical records, systems design, telecommunications infrastructure and health care provider uptake.<sup>11,12</sup> Investments in monitoring, evaluation and research will improve our understanding of where virtual healthcare offers equivalent or better care and where in-person appointments are more appropriate. This information is pivotal to ensure virtual healthcare is an effective, integrated facet of the healthcare system. There also remains a need to work with, and fund patient groups to build awareness and comfort around accessing virtual healthcare. This includes improving

digital health literacy, promoting the benefits of virtual healthcare and addressing patient and caregiver concerns regarding safety, efficacy, privacy, and data storage.

## Why now?

Adopting virtual healthcare has been a necessary shift in healthcare services during the pandemic, but as restrictions are lifted and life returns to a new normal, it is both beneficial for the healthcare system and patients for virtual healthcare options to be permanently embedded in the healthcare system across the country with accompanying investments in infrastructure and resources.

There is strong public support across Canada for investment in enhanced virtual healthcare. An April 2021 telephone public opinion poll found that the majority of respondents want their provincial government to provide funding to ensure equitable, sustainable and easy-to-use access to virtual healthcare. More than 7 in 10 (72%) want their provincial government to provide funding to improve access to virtual healthcare among groups who face barriers.<sup>13</sup> Additionally, 80% or more of respondents want their provincial government to provide funding to train health care professionals and educate patients on virtual health care adoption.<sup>13</sup> In another Heart & Stroke survey comprised of heart disease and stroke patients and caregivers, the majority of respondents reported their virtual healthcare appointment was convenient.<sup>14</sup>

In a public healthcare system often plagued with long wait times and limited resources, virtual healthcare has been shown to increase the timeliness of treatment and improve system efficiencies.<sup>15,16</sup> Research has shown that virtual healthcare can improve management for patients with heart failure, chronic coronary artery disease and diabetes, among other chronic conditions.<sup>17-20</sup>

Virtual healthcare is an effective healthcare delivery tool for urban, rural and remote communities<sup>21,22</sup> especially when it involves the utilization of telephone appointments.<sup>1</sup> Specialists and allied health professionals can provide care for patients across the country regardless of geographic location. Virtual healthcare is also beneficial for caregivers by enabling them to be included in healthcare delivery despite any geographic barriers or those caused by the current pandemic.<sup>23</sup> Caregivers also play an integral role in virtual healthcare uptake as they are essential in supporting seniors and those individuals with impairments navigate the healthcare system.<sup>23</sup> Patients with mobility issues, such a stroke, can see a provider virtually without the challenges of travelling to an appointment.



Virtual healthcare can reduce costs incurred by patients such as decreased travel time and expenses, daycare costs, and lost wages due to taking time off work.<sup>15,16</sup> Virtual healthcare can lead to high patient satisfaction<sup>24</sup> and lower per capita and out of pocket health expenditures.<sup>15-19</sup> A modelling study of a North American virtual healthcare stroke network found estimated cost savings of \$358,435 USD per year across the eight sites compared to traditional in-person stroke care.<sup>25</sup>

Virtual visits allowed clinicians to stay in contact with patients during the pandemic, especially those managing chronic conditions, and triage those who needed an in-person visit or diagnostic tests while providing outpatient treatment plans for others.<sup>26</sup> Virtual healthcare can provide quicker access to care and can improve access for those with health conditions that make seeing a doctor difficult or unsafe. Preliminary findings demonstrate patients miss fewer virtual healthcare appointments compared with in-person visits due to increased accessibility particularly among marginalized groups.<sup>27,28</sup> Also, research has shown that the diagnostic accuracy of virtual compared with traditional diagnosis can be up to 91% across a wide range of conditions.<sup>29</sup>

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