

## Telehealth a game changer: closing the gap in remote Aboriginal communities

TO THE EDITOR: We strongly agree with St Clair and colleagues<sup>1</sup> that telehealth is a “game changer” for the provision of health services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in Australia. For more than 15 years, we have been engaging with Indigenous communities throughout Queensland, to plan and establish telehealth services for a range of clinical disciplines, including diabetes, ear, nose and throat, and aged care.

Telehealth is contributing to positive changes in our health system and this is evidenced in our recent studies highlighting the value of telehealth for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. A systematic review of the outcomes of using telehealth for the provision of care to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people reported improved social and emotional wellbeing, clinical outcomes and access to health services.<sup>2</sup> Other benefits included improved screening rates

and reduced need for travel.<sup>3</sup> This review reinforced the importance of partnerships between Aboriginal community controlled health services (ACCHSs) and public hospitals.

Telehealth also helps with the delivery of culturally appropriate care. In a qualitative investigative study,<sup>4</sup> we found that telehealth allowed specialist care to be delivered from Aboriginal medical services which were familiar to the patient and local care providers. According to this study, a telehealth consultation with a specialist held in the ACCHS resulted in less stress and greater convenience; and also meant that an Indigenous health worker could be present during the telehealth appointment to provide advocacy and support for the patient.<sup>4</sup> Telehealth also reduced out-of-pocket expense for the patient. These factors contributed to the interpretation of culturally appropriate services.

Telehealth is already benefiting Indigenous people throughout Australia. All studies recognise the pivotal role of ACCHSs as advocates for telehealth.

While telehealth applications are predominantly reported in rural and remote areas, we believe that telehealth is just as important for the delivery of specialist health care services to metropolitan ACCHSs, in lieu of community members attending mainstream health services.

Telehealth is one mechanism to help close the gap. Telehealth empowers community health services and can improve equity of access to health services in rural and remote — and urban — settings.

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