



**Australian Government**

**Department of Health**

## **Telehealth measure to improve access to psychological services for rural and remote patients**

### **Frequently Asked Questions**

#### **What is the new telehealth mental health initiative?**

From 1 November 2017, eligible patients in rural and remote locations with a Mental Health Treatment Plan will be able to claim rebates for video consultations through the Medicare Benefits Schedule 'Better Access to Psychiatrists, Psychologists and General Practitioners' (Better Access) initiative. The changes announced will allow up to seven of ten Better Access mental health consultations to be provided through video conferencing, with one of the first four sessions required to be delivered through a face-to-face consultation.

Relevant services can be delivered by eligible allied mental health professionals, that are eligible to provide Medicare rebatable services under the Better Access initiative, that is:

- clinical psychologists;
- registered psychologists;
- occupational therapists; and
- social workers.

More information about the budget announcement is available from the Health website at: [Health Budget 2017-18 Better Access telehealth](#).

#### **What funding has been provided?**

The Australian Government has announced funding of \$9.1 million over four years from 2017-18 to improve access to mental health therapy services for people in rural, remote and very remote locations.

#### **When will the initiative commence?**

The initiative will commence on 1 November 2017.

#### **What is a telehealth eligible area?**

Telehealth mental health items will be available to people living in Monash Modified Model (MMM) regions four to seven. The MMM is a classification system that categorises metropolitan, regional, rural and remote areas according to both geographical remoteness and town size. More information about the Modified Monash Model is available at: [Modified Monash Model](#). A search tool to identify the MMM region of a specific location is available at: [MMM locator](#).

### **Why is this new initiative needed?**

The Telehealth Access to Psychological Services measure has been introduced to enhance ease of access to, and increase choice in, mental health services in rural and remote areas of Australia. It is widely recognised that there is a scarcity of mental health professionals in some of the more remote areas of Australia, and this can act as a significant barrier for those who need to access these services.

The demand for mental health services in rural and regional Australia is growing. Enhanced telehealth arrangements will enable Australians who live in rural and remote Australia to claim a Medicare rebate for video consultations with allied mental health professionals. This additional funding is expected to provide an incentive for allied mental health professionals to provide more services in more regional and remote areas of Australia.

### **Who will benefit from the new telehealth initiative?**

Services under this measure are available to patients with an assessed mental disorder who would benefit from a structured approach to the management of their treatment needs. People who might otherwise have not been able to take up mental health therapy services because of where they live will have access to services from their home location via video conference.

This improved access will allow people in need of mental health therapy services to receive treatment promptly, and reduce any potential inconvenience, time and expense of having to travel to larger regional centres or major cities for sessions with their treating allied mental health professional.

### **What services will be available?**

Medicare rebates are available for up to ten individual and ten group mental health therapy services per calendar year (1 January – 31 December) to patients with a Mental Health Treatment Plan who are referred for mental health therapy services.

Under the Telehealth measure, eligible allied mental health professionals will be able to deliver by videoconference up to seven of the ten mental health consultations for eligible patients, that is, those with clinically diagnosed mental disorders who are living in rural and remote locations. One of the first four consultations must be a face-to-face session.

Relevant services can be delivered by eligible allied mental health professionals, that is, clinical psychologists, registered psychologists, occupational therapists and social workers that meet the relevant registration requirements under Medicare.

### **Does Medicare cover video consultations for groups?**

Yes. Under the new MBS telehealth items for mental health therapy services, video consultation will be available for groups of six to 10 patients. In addition, one of the first four group sessions must be face-to-face and only seven of the ten group sessions are available via telehealth. The usual requirements for a Better Access group session will apply. The treating allied mental health professional would need to determine whether a group consultation is suitable, safe and clinically appropriate.

### **Can a person access their current provider of mental health therapy services via telehealth?**

If a person with a mental illness living in a rural or remote area is already accessing Better Access consultations and they have an existing therapeutic relationship with an eligible allied mental

health professional, they may be able to consult their preferred provider through video conference provided that:

- the patient is resident in a telehealth eligible area and is located at least 15 kilometres by road from the eligible allied mental health provider; and
- the clinical psychologist, registered psychologist, occupational therapist or social worker meets the relevant Medicare registration requirements ; and
- the required number of face-to-face consultations are met.

### **How will potential clients become aware of clinicians offering this telehealth service?**

New clients are encouraged to speak with their GP to discuss the potential availability and suitability of telehealth mental health therapy services.

Patients who are currently receiving Better Access services are encouraged to speak with their GP and/or treating allied mental health professional to find out if telehealth mental health therapy services are available through their current provider.

Useful information may also be available through the following professional association websites:

Australian Psychological Society

[www.psychology.org.au/](http://www.psychology.org.au/)

<http://www.believeinchange.com/Home/Become-the-Change/Find-A-Psychologist>

Occupational Therapy Australia

<https://www.otaus.com.au/>

<https://www.otaus.com.au/find-an-occupational-therapist>

Australian Association of Social workers

<https://www.aasw.asn.au>

<https://www.aasw.asn.au/find-a-social-worker/search/>

Royal Australian College of General Practice

<https://www.racgp.org.au/your-practice/mh/>

### **How many consultations are funded through Medicare?**

Patients will be able to claim up to 10 individual items and 10 group items per calendar year, including a maximum of seven telehealth individual items and seven telehealth group items.

### **Will more than seven sessions be available via telehealth in exceptional circumstances?**

All patients referred for Better Access services are eligible for ten sessions per calendar year. If the patient is in Modified Monash Model regions four to seven, a total of seven of those sessions can be via telehealth. After six sessions (for example, one face-to-face and five via telehealth), the patient will need to return to the referring practitioner for review and potential referral for further sessions. If further sessions are recommended, the patient could only have another two sessions via telehealth (making a total of seven sessions) but could also have another two sessions face-to-face in the calendar year. Once a patient has accessed their maximum number of Medicare funded telehealth sessions, no additional telehealth sessions are available.

### **What is Better Access?**

The Better Access initiative is funded through the Medicare Benefits Schedule (MBS) and provides Medicare rebates to patients for selected mental health therapy services provided by eligible General Practitioners, psychiatrists, clinical psychologists, registered psychologists, social workers and occupational therapists.

The Better Access initiative was introduced to address low treatment rates for high prevalence mental disorders such as depression and anxiety – particularly presentations of mild to moderate severity where short term evidence based interventions are most likely to be useful. It aims to improve outcomes for people with a clinically-diagnosed mental disorder through evidence-based treatment.

### **How does the telehealth initiative differ from current Better Access arrangements?**

The Better Access initiative currently provides rebates for eligible General Practitioners, clinical psychologists, registered psychologists, occupational therapists and social workers to deliver up to ten individual and ten group mental health therapy sessions, delivered face-to-face, in a calendar year to patients with an assessed mental disorder who are referred by:

- a General Practitioner managing the patient under a GP Mental Health Treatment Plan; or
- a psychiatrist or paediatrician.

The ten individual services may consist of GP focussed psychological strategies, psychological therapy services (provided by a clinical psychologist), and/or focussed psychological strategies provided by an eligible allied mental health professional.

The changes announced will allow up to seven of ten annual Better Access mental health therapy consultations to be provided through video consultation for eligible patients, that is, those with clinically diagnosed mental disorders living in rural and remote locations. One of the first four sessions is required to be delivered through a face-to-face consultation. Relevant services can be delivered by eligible clinical psychologists, registered psychologists, occupational therapists and social workers. However, unlike Better Access, GPs are not eligible under this telehealth initiative.

### **Why are face-to-face consultations required as part of this telehealth measure?**

The Australian Government recognises the potential of video consultations in delivering better health care services and health outcomes. While telehealth has the potential to improve access to health care services for those in rural and remote Australia, the Government's position has been that telehealth should be an adjunct to face-to-face services and not replace them. Face-to-face consultations have an important role in developing the clinician-patient relationship.

### **Must a video link be provided or is telephone only consultation sufficient?**

The requirement for a video link to form part of the consultation is an essential element to enable a claim for telehealth attendance items. The Government is not mandating or endorsing any particular technical solution for telehealth. In providing MBS billed telehealth services, the eligible allied health professional should be confident that the technical solution they choose is:

- capable of providing sufficient video quality for the clinical service being provided; and
- sufficiently secure to ensure normal privacy requirements for health information are met.

The individual eligible allied mental health professional will need to be confident that the technology used is able to satisfy the item descriptor and that software and hardware used to deliver a video conference meets the applicable laws for security and privacy. More information is

provided at the [technology and technical issues page](#) on the Department of Health's MBS online website.

**Can Medicare telehealth benefits be paid if the session is conducted via online chat box/messaging?**

For a Medicare telehealth benefit to be paid for the specialist telehealth service, a visual and audio link must be established with the patient. Medicare telehealth benefits are not payable for email or telephone consultations. This would include online chat box/messaging as there is no visual and audio link.

**Will telehealth consultation be suitable for all clients requiring psychological counselling?**

Mental health consultation via video conferencing may not be appropriate for all patients, particularly if there is concern that a person is at risk of doing harm to themselves or others, or if the patient does not have access to reliable or affordable broadband and/or technology required for video conferencing.

The Department has funded the Australian Psychological Society to provide information, resources and operational advice to eligible allied health professionals on:

- the initial assessment requirements to ensure the person and their presentation is suitable to be a recipient of telehealth mental health therapy services;
- risk management procedures for managing clients at risk of self-harm or harm to others when delivering services via video conferencing; and
- the principles for choosing high quality, safe technology to deliver telehealth mental health therapy services.

In addition each of the relevant professional associations has undertaken to promote and explain the telehealth measure to their members, and contribute to any directories identifying appropriately skilled allied health professionals.

**What role will general practitioners play in the telehealth mental health initiative?**

The Telehealth Access to Psychological Services measure has been introduced to enhance ease of access to mental health services in rural and remote areas of Australia. The intention of the measure is to increase access to mental health therapy services in areas where a scarcity of allied mental health professionals is a key barrier to receiving the appropriate mental health support.

General Practitioners cannot bill for video consultations to prepare or review Mental Health Treatment Plans or deliver GP Focussed Psychological Strategies under this initiative.

While GPs will not be funded for telehealth services under this new measure, the Australian Government recognises that the GP forms an essential part of a wider team of mental health service providers. GPs are often the initial point of contact for people seeking help when suffering a mental illness and provide a variety of services related to mental health care, including direct care, shared care, and referral to specialised mental health services. Many people who have been seriously affected by mental illness manage their illness with only the support of a GP.

GPs can still participate in existing Better Access program and are able to bill for GP focussed psychological strategies services under these existing arrangements. GPs that wish to deliver these services are required to complete mental health training to be an eligible provider of Better Access GP focussed psychological strategies. More information is available at: [RACGP](#).

In 2011, the Government introduced telehealth services under the MBS to address some of the barriers that people in remote rural and regional areas face in accessing *specialist services*. The existing specialist telehealth items are available to GPs if the video consultation requires support from a GP (or other medical practitioner, midwife, Aboriginal health worker or practice nurse) to attend at the 'patient-end'. Whilst GP consultations are not eligible for telehealth MBS benefits, GPs will continue to have access to patient-end support services MBS benefits during telehealth specialist consultations.

However, as mental health therapy services delivered by Allied Health professionals do not require the participation of a GP at the 'patient-end' of the video conference, Medicare rebates are not available for GPs to attend the new mental health therapy telehealth consultations.

### **How can GPs and eligible allied mental health professionals find out more information?**

The Australian Government has developed Guidelines and this FAQ document to support the implementation of this initiative and will continue to provide updated information through the Health website.

The Australian Government has also funded the Australian Psychological Society (APS) to develop additional information and resources for allied mental health professionals, GPs and consumers to support the safe and effective implementation of this initiative. More information about these resources will be available through the APS over the coming weeks.

### **Does Medicare cover short-term telehealth sessions for clients who briefly travel overseas?**

Medicare in general does not cover services received outside Australia.

### **Are there any changes to Medicare payment claiming processes that apply to Better Access telehealth services?**

No. There are no changes to the Medicare payment claiming processes. More information for Health professionals, including Medicare payment claiming forms and processes, is available through the [Department of Human Services website](#).

### **Can the Telehealth for rural and remote patients be accessed by young people 12 - 25 years old?**

Patient age restrictions do not apply to accessing telehealth MBS services. However, telehealth MBS services can only be provided to a patient who is:

- a non-admitted patient; and
- is eligible for Medicare rebates; and
- is located in an Eligible Geographical Area, Modified Monash Model regions 4-7, and is more than 15 kilometres from the treating allied mental health professional at the time of consultation.

The treating allied mental health professional would need to determine whether a telehealth mental health therapy service is suitable, safe and clinically appropriate for patients of all ages.

### **As a provider of the former Access to Allied Psychological Services or Psychological Therapy Services available through Primary Health Networks (PHN), will telehealth sessions be available under the PHN gap free sessions?**

PHNs can commission telehealth services, but patients and providers would need to contact their local PHN to seek advice on whether this is available in their area.