

Telehealth capacity building in allied health services

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Background

Telehealth is proposed as a key strategy to enhance consumers' access to care particularly in rural and remote areas, and to improve service efficiency. However information to guide telehealth capacity building strategies is relatively limited for the allied health professions.

Methods

A telehealth capacity building scoping project sought information on telehealth use, barriers and enablers through a desktop review, interviews with individuals implementing allied health telehealth services in Queensland and interstate public health services, and an online survey of Queensland Hospital and Health Services allied health staff and other stakeholders. Data was collated and analysed to identify major themes, and compile summary information on telehealth models, clinical applications of telehealth, and training and support resources available for allied health.

Results

Data was collected from 52 interviewees and 128 survey respondents. Respondents most commonly used synchronous telehealth (videoconference). The service models used could be described as either 'dual clinician' (health care provider at host and recipient sites) or 'direct client care' (provider at host site only). Limited knowledge, training and confidence with clinical redesign and service redesign required for telehealth were the primary barriers to implementation. Clinical redesign includes adapting clinical tasks, functions and programs for delivery via telehealth. Four strategies were identified for adapting practice to telehealth; technological solutions, workforce/collaborative practice, care planning and task adaptation. Service redesign challenges include negotiating partnerships with staff in recipient sites to support the model, funding, scheduling and assessing efficiency and activity impacts.

Discussion

The project identified a significant unmet demand for training, resources and support to assist clinicians to implement telehealth as part of their practice. Demand is particularly evident for practical, profession-specific, clinical information on adapting practice for telehealth delivery. Project findings have informed the development of allied health telehealth capacity building strategies to be implemented in Queensland Health in 2015-16.