Patient outcomes drive telehealth

Digital technology is providing health, employment, economic and social benefits in the North East that can be replicated across the whole of Victoria.

Hume Telehealth Agency Manager at Northeast Health Wangaratta, Jane Kealey, said the agency was set up as a one-stop shop for all - patients, carers and health service providers.

"The aim is to connect patients and health providers using digital technology to deliver health care more conveniently. Often this is through a video conference call," Ms Kealey said.

"If you can imagine the impact a health issue has on your ability to travel, work, or on your family life, then you begin to understand the benefits of telehealth services. There are savings in time, cost and inconvenience of travel, as well as greater treatment compliance and improved health outcomes for patients," she said.

"Improving outcomes for rural patients is my driving interest, so managing the agency means I have really challenging and interesting work right here in Wangaratta."

There are many employment opportunities in digital health in the region. Technology also helps support clinicians in isolated practice. Nurses say clinical services developed using technology have made a huge difference to their confidence in managing particular patients.

Two examples are the Cochlear Mapping Clinic and the Digital ECG (electro-cardio-graph) service.

"After Cochlear surgery, patients would normally be required to go to Melbourne for monthly or even fortnightly sound 'mapping' to retrain the brain – it's like a tuning exercise. Now that six community nurses have had the training, this can be done in Wangaratta through remote computing to the Eye and Ear Hospital in Melbourne," Ms Kealey said.

"The Digital ECG service is in the early stage of roll out. ECG machines provide immediate feedback, but the new part of the service means high quality images can be shared with a doctor immediately using remote devices. Ambulance Victoria also has access to the system which is being developed for use across the state."

Olivia Stapleton, the Acting Nurse Unit Manager at Alpine Health Bright, Associate Professor Les Bolitho and colleagues developed the Hume Algorithm for management of patients with chest pain and heart conditions as part of the ECG project. The digital ECG service supplements this clinical process and Ambulance Victoria's emergency services, and keeps an important, easily accessible digital record of a patient's heart traces.

"In a rural or remote hospital, without a GP on site, the digital ECG can be read from anywhere by the GP on call. The registered nurse can contact the GP on the phone and discuss the ECG and initiate treatment immediately. The ECG remains in the system so a specialist physician can see it anywhere in real time, if needed," Ms Stapleton said.

Ms Kealey said internet speed continues to be challenging for the development of telehealth options, but the prices of components and solutions continues to drop.

"There was a time, just a couple of years ago, when simply doing a video call meant days of work putting holes in firewalls just to connect. We've come a long way and the future use of monitoring and wearable devices is very exciting. Opportunities to create more telehealth services creates more employment in the region and ultimately reduces the rural-metro divide," she said.

---

northeasthealth.org.au/telehealth

You can read more case studies from this region at www.rdv.vic.gov.au/regional-partnerships/ovens-murray/projects

Interested in relocating to North East Victoria?

Contact Regional Development Victoria www.rdv.vic.gov.au/victorias-regions/hume

Health specialties that can be accessed using telehealth services include breast and gynaecological cancer, diabetes education and palliative care.