

Healthcare AI

Exploring the future of Telehealth and virtual care in Australia

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Telehealth and other virtual care services have played powerful roles in combating the spread of COVID-19 in Australia. And now that millions of patients and practitioners have had the chance to experience its transformative potential, they don't want to give it up. Virtual and remote care are here to stay, and with them has come a new digital health paradigm. Dr. Simon Wallace explores that paradigm, and how AI is helping clinicians achieve virtual care excellence within it.

Since it was first introduced in 2011, the Australian government's Telehealth initiative has been helping patients across the country engage with clinicians and access a wide range of care services remotely. But, up until 2020, both patient uptake and the number of active use cases for Telehealth remained relatively low. That was, until the COVID-19 pandemic struck.

With hospitals and clinics forced to transform how they operated overnight, and local lockdowns limiting how patients could access care, Telehealth and virtual care services were thrust into the spotlight—going from niche alternative to primary healthcare delivery channel for millions of people overnight.

According to a [survey by the Royal Australian College of General Practitioners](#), just 13% of GPs had offered care to patients over the telephone prior to the pandemic. In early 2020, that figure surged to 99%, as GPs adapted to the conditions created by COVID-19.

The number of use cases for Telehealth also expanded rapidly during that time. Telehealth and virtual

care services have been used in areas like mental health care and clinical consultation to great effect for years. But with many patients unable to visit hospitals, care providers have had to operate [entirely virtual hospitals](#), and deliver a huge range of acute care services remotely through virtual care technology.

Across those use cases, virtual care has played a huge role in safeguarding the health and wellbeing of millions of people during the critical early months of the pandemic. But, perhaps even more importantly, the surge in uptake triggered by COVID-19 led to a major revelation amongst both patients and practitioners—they liked engaging with virtual care services.

Virtual care goes from niche alternative to first choice for patients and practitioners alike

When hospitals, clinics, and other care providers expanded their remote care offerings to meet new pandemic-based demand, many approached it as a stop-gap solution. This was something they needed to do to meet a short-term need and weather the coming storm. But now, more than 18 months on, neither patients nor practitioners want to give expanded Telehealth services up.

In September 2020, [Australia's largest ever Telehealth survey](#) showed that 87% of practitioners were interested in continuing to use telehealth if there was ongoing MBS funding for it. And very recently, a [new global study by Nuance](#) discovered that more than one in four (27%) Australian patients have turned away from face-to-face appointments as their preferred method for accessing medical advice and treatment.

For a region like Australia, it's easy to see why patients and practitioners prefer these remote offerings. Australia's vast geography has historically made accessing healthcare a major challenge for people in rural areas and the country's elderly population. But using remote services, patients have more convenient access, and practitioners can ensure every patient receives a high-quality clinical follow-up no matter where they're based.

With both patients and practitioners now placing far greater trust in digital healthcare technologies, and preferences for remote engagements rising, it's becoming clearer every day that the future of virtual care is the future of healthcare in Australia. And when you look at the benefits it can deliver, that's great news for the entire country.

A single solution to a conflux of emerging healthcare challenges in Australia

The increased deployments and adoption of virtual care services seen across Australia in the last 18 months has played a huge role in the country's pandemic response, and undoubtedly saved lives. But the real beauty of the virtual care approach lies in how many more of today's biggest healthcare challenges it can help the nation to tackle.

For patients, virtual healthcare technology is helping to:

- **Improve the accessibility and inclusivity of healthcare** services for patients across all demographics and physical locations.
- **Reduce wait times** by making a wider range of practitioners available to patients and alleviating regional clinician shortages.
- **Make care available anywhere, anytime** even when a patient has travelled abroad, or is in a remote location away from their usual practitioner.
- **Increase care quality** by reducing pressure on practitioners and empowering them with the information they need to deliver better outcomes at speed.

On the practitioner and clinician side, virtual care technology can also help to:

- **Reduce travel time** and enable them to spend more of their working day focusing on direct care delivery and patient outcomes.
- **Strengthen patient relationships** and follow-up with patients more frequently and informally to monitor their health more closely.
- **Deepen collaboration between practitioners** through the digital capture of data and information shared during telehealth engagements.
- **Combat clinician burnout** by cutting out some of the manual work and effort associated with managing physical appointments and engagements.

But not all these benefits follow as an automatic result of delivering care remotely. To realise them fully,

clinicians will need to evolve how they operate, embracing new tools and technologies that help them to make the most of everything the future of virtual care has to offer.

The future of virtual care demands new best practices

Virtual care is ushering in a whole new health paradigm—it's fundamentally changing how patients receive care, what healthcare engagements look like, and how we think about care delivery.

At this key moment, it's important for healthcare organisations to take a step back and consider what's it takes to create the best patient outcomes, when clinician and patient aren't in the same physical room. Here are just a few questions every provider should ask:

- How should clinical and health data be captured and shared between practitioners across virtual care journeys?
- How can we apply AI to accelerate diagnosis and give patients greater control of their own virtual health journeys?
- How do patients want to engage with practitioners in a virtual context, and how does that differ from their physical engagement preferences?
- How will clinical workflows need to evolve to best facilitate strong, effective telehealth experiences and journeys?

The future of virtual care is both patient-centric and AI-driven

As healthcare organisations answer these crucial questions, they will find that AI and cloud—both key elements within Australia's national eHealth strategy—have an important role to play in creating excellent virtual and remote experiences.

Indeed, many healthcare organisations are already using AI to support better outcomes for patients and practitioners alike. [AI-powered speech recognition](#), for example, allows clinicians to create accurate, detailed clinical notes simply by speaking. The benefits of this technology—from the time it saves practitioners, to the freedom it gives them to focus on their patients—are only magnified in the context of Telehealth and virtual care. Making a human connection over video is hard enough; the last thing a clinician needs is to be constantly looking down at their keyboard, manually navigating fields and typing notes.

Crucially, Australian patients also recognise the value of bringing AI into their healthcare experiences. OnePoll [recently surveyed](#) Australians about the benefits of AI-assisted clinical documentation; among the respondents open to the idea, 47% said it would help their doctor focus on the diagnosis, 58% that it would save time, and over a third that it would improve levels of detail and accuracy.

Want to learn more about the past, present, and future of virtual care in Australia—and the key role AI is set to play? Be sure to download our new ePaper, [Healthcare Overcomes Distance](#).

Tags: [Future of healthcare](#), [Future of telehealth](#)

More Information

Telehealth in Australia ePaper

Discover how Telehealth and virtual care is helping to improve the accessibility, inclusivity, and quality of healthcare services across Australia—and beyond.

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About Dr. Simon Wallace

Dr. Simon Wallace is the Chief Clinical Information Officer (CCIO) of Nuance's Healthcare division in the UK and Ireland. Simon has worked as a GP, hospital and public health doctor in Brighton and London. His interest in health informatics began in the 90s when he spent a year at the King's Fund investigating the impact of the internet on shared decision making between patients and their healthcare professional. For the past 15 years, he has worked for a range of organisations including Bupa, Dr Foster, Cerner Corporation and GSK across a range of technologies which include electronic patient records, telemedicine, mobile health and lifestyle devices. Simon has a keen interest in the voluntary sector, recently completing a 7 year term as a Trustee for Fitzrovia Youth in Action, a children and young people's charity based in London.

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