

Telehealth: an option in outpatient mental health services?

Introduction: Telehealth became a solution for remote health service delivery during COVID-19 lockdowns internationally. However, qualitative research in the wider mental health workforce and service delivery space over COVID-19 is growing at a slower pace than other COVID-19 research.

Methods: Semi-structured interviews with outpatient mental health clients and whānau (n=21), and clinicians (n=33) conducted in person or via Zoom facilitated via outpatient service team leaders. These interviews were complemented by analysis of outpatient administrative data of the three DHBs where the study took place. VUW HEC #28808

Results: Clients and clinicians spoke around six main areas:

1. Fear of exposure to COVID-19
2. Need for flexibility and safe spaces
3. Curation of the home environment, to
 - a) create a therapeutic space and
 - b) minimise intrusion
4. The importance of relationship building
5. Recognising non-verbal cues
6. The need for preparedness at organisational and personal levels

Discussion: Telehealth use has largely subsided, and arguably was not used by teams to its full potential, due to a range of factors, including lack of appropriate resources (e.g., headphones, webcams, available computers) and training. There is value in telehealth, particularly when there are good established relationships between client and clinician.

Key immediate steps required to ensure its future success include:

1. Better administrative data collection on appointments, primarily due to errors in recording appointments
2. Better resourcing of outpatient teams and clients to ensure access to resources (including telephones for clients) to facilitate telehealth appointments as a normalised option
3. Training of mental health clinicians in how to conduct telehealth appointments
4. Discussion with outpatient clients around how and when to conduct appointments, setting in place protocols and expectations for these appointments, including how to manage key ethical principals and maintain service user code of rights.

