



# Telemedicine

Phone and Video  
Consultations

A guide for doctors



Comhairle na nDochtúirí Leighis  
Medical Council

**The Medical Council expects doctors to follow the principles of professional practice within the Guide to Professional Conduct and Ethics for Registered Medical Practitioners (Amended) 8th Edition 2019 ('the guide'). This information booklet on telemedicine has been designed to provide practical advice to doctors in relation to telemedicine consultations.**

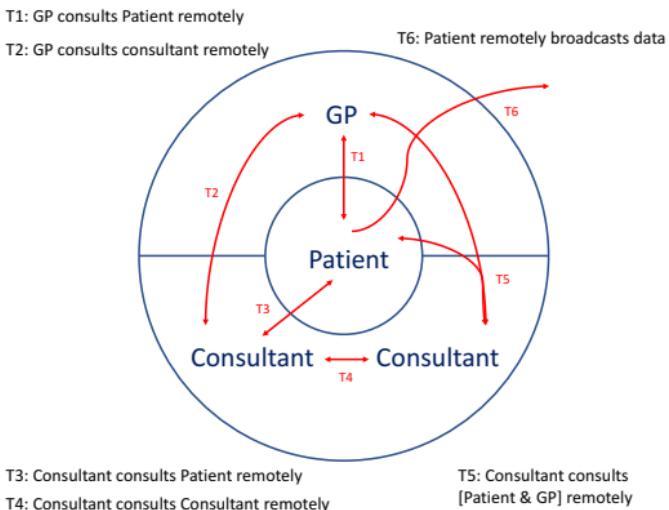
**The information booklet has been developed by the Telemedicine Working Group of the Medical Council.**

# Why has this booklet been produced?

Many doctors already use some form of information and communications technology when providing care. The impact of COVID-19 has meant that telemedicine has now become an integral part of medicine. Telemedicine can help patients who are vulnerable receive necessary care, provide patients with more convenient access to care, ease of access for those in isolated locations, allow for more comprehensive delivery of services after-hours and allow for more efficient use of limited health resources. Telemedicine is particularly useful when it is part of an existing system for providing patient care.

The conceptual framework (in Figure 1) relates to telemedicine and how telemedicine revolves not just around the patient and the GP but the patient, the GP and the Consultant with multi-faceted interactions between them.

**Figure 1.** The conceptual framework of Telemedicine



As with a face-to-face consultation, the principles of care are the same:

- ▶ High-quality patient care is the priority.
- ▶ The use of telemedicine does not alter the ethical, professional or legal obligations of doctors, regardless of how the doctor-patient interaction occurs. Doctors must comply with the Guide to Professional Conduct and Ethics which sets out the principles of professional practice that all doctors registered with the Council are expected to follow.
- ▶ Doctors are responsible for determining the appropriateness of telemedicine to support the best outcome for their patients, considering their patients' context and symptoms.
- ▶ Patient privacy and confidentiality of personal health information must be protected.
- ▶ Care standards for practice, such as evidence-based best practice, should be carried through to care delivered via telemedicine.
- ▶ As with face-to-face appointments that require the use of interpreters, the presence of family members or a carer, or other aides; those same supports should be arranged for telemedicine consultations.



## Telemedicine Definition:

The Guide to Professional Conduct and Ethics for Registered Medical Practitioners (Amended) 8th Edition 2019 provides a definition for telemedicine:

**Telemedicine describes the delivery of health care services through information and communication technologies to promote the health of individuals and their communities.**

**It involves the exchange of information between doctors and patients, or between doctors and professional colleagues, for the diagnosis, treatment and prevention of disease and injuries, and for research, evaluation and continuing education.**

## Benefits and Potential Uses of Telemedicine

A number of changes have occurred in the way healthcare is delivered as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. These changes have been necessary to minimise transmission risks of COVID-19 to healthcare professionals and patients. The Medical Council acknowledges that the use of telemedicine is not new, however the COVID-19 pandemic has promoted the use of telemedicine as a way of delivering acute, chronic, primary and specialty care.

## **Telemedicine can:**

- ▶ Help maintain continuity of care which could avoid the negative consequences from delayed preventive, chronic or routine care
- ▶ Increase participation for those who are medically or socially vulnerable or who do not have ready access to providers (for those using private telemedicine services)
- ▶ Help preserve the patient-doctor relationship at times when an in-person visit is not practical or feasible
- ▶ Be a safer option for doctors by reducing potential infectious exposures

## **Telemedicine services can be used to:**

- ▶ Screen patients who may have symptoms of COVID-19 and refer as appropriate
- ▶ Provide low-risk urgent care for non-COVID-19 conditions, identify those persons who may need additional medical consultation or assessment, and refer for further investigation and treatment as appropriate
- ▶ Access primary care providers and specialists, including mental and behavioural health, for chronic health conditions and medication management
- ▶ Provide coaching and support for patients managing chronic health conditions, including weight management and nutrition counselling

- ▶ Participate in physical therapy, occupational therapy, and other modalities as a hybrid approach to in-person care for optimal health
- ▶ Monitor clinical signs of certain chronic medical conditions (e.g. blood pressure, blood glucose, other remote assessments)
- ▶ Engage in case management for patients who have difficulty accessing care (e.g. those who live in very rural settings, older adults, those with limited mobility)
- ▶ Follow up with patients after hospitalization
- ▶ Deliver advance care planning and counselling to patients and their carers to document preferences if a life-threatening event or medical crisis occurs
- ▶ Provide non-emergent care to residents in long-term care facilities
- ▶ Provide education and training for doctors through peer-to-peer professional medical consultations (inpatient or outpatient) that are not locally available, particularly in rural areas

## Potential Limitations of Telemedicine

- ▶ Situations in which in-person visits are more appropriate due to urgency and/or underlying health conditions
- ▶ An inability to perform an appropriate physical exam
- ▶ The need to address sensitive topics, especially if there is patient discomfort or concern for privacy
- ▶ Limited access to technological devices (e.g. phone, smartphone, tablet, computer) needed for a telemedicine visit, or connectivity issues

## Continuing Professional Development



Doctors providing telemedicine are expected to maintain competence in the technologies and communication skills required for telemedicine. Related training can be part of a doctor's plan to meet mandatory Continuing Professional Development (CPD) requirements. Contact your professional competence scheme provider to determine credit eligibility for specific courses or programs.

## Obtaining Patient Consent

Refer to the Guide for Professional Conduct and Ethics and paragraphs 9 to 13 in relation to consent. The same principles apply in telemedicine and you should make sure that patients have given their consent to conduct the consultation through telemedicine and consent to any treatment provided.



You should tell a patient if their information is to be shared with any other healthcare professionals as part of their ongoing care.

You must give patients enough information, in a way that they can understand, to enable them to exercise their right to make informed decisions about their care.

### **Points to consider discussing with the patient in plain language:**

- ▶ Appropriateness and limitations of telemedicine for their care
- ▶ Security and privacy risks of the telemedicine technologies being used
- ▶ Measures taken to mitigate those risks
- ▶ Whether encounters will be recorded and recordings maintained in the patient record; and
- ▶ That notes of the consultation will be included in the patient record in the same way they would in a face to face consultation.



Doctors providing telemedicine are expected to be knowledgeable in the technologies they use and ensure their patients are also well-informed. Conducting a Data Protection Impact Assessment will help the doctor identify and mitigate security and privacy risks.

## Protecting Client Privacy and Confidentiality



Doctors should protect the privacy of patient information through effective security measures.

To help patients protect their own privacy and optimize their telemedicine experience, doctors should advise patients to:



- ▶ use only a secure connection, either a landline or password-protected, preferably encrypted Wi-Fi (public hotspots are not protected and could compromise their privacy);
- ▶ check for adequate bandwidth and screen resolution if using video call technology; and
- ▶ find a quiet, private space to avoid interruptions and the potential for others to overhear.

Doctors should make every effort to ensure that any notes they make about a patient are placed in the patient's medical record and inform the patient's general practitioner of the telemedicine consultation.

Doctors must also comply with the Data Protection Act 2018 and ensure any personal information relating to a patient is stored and processed in line with the seven key principles of GDPR.

## What does the patient need to take part in a telemedicine consultation?



Many services are now offering appointments using a video call. The patient might be sent an appointment letter from the hospital or receive an e-mail, call or text message from their family doctor or another service.

To have a video call with a doctor, the patient would need:

-  ▶ A device like a smart-phone, computer, tablet or laptop
-  ▶ A reasonable internet connection (if the patient can watch a video online, e.g. Youtube, then they should be able to have a video call)
-  ▶ Web-camera, speakers and microphone (these are normally built into the device someone is using)
-  ▶ A private, well-lit area that is quiet and where the patient will not be disturbed
-  ▶ Offer the patient the option to speak to a member of the practice / healthcare provider if they need more information or help in using this type of service.

# What to advise a patient in preparing for a telemedicine consultation?



## Choose a private space

Finding privacy can sometimes be difficult, especially if the patient lives with other people. Before their appointment, suggest the patient chooses a quiet room where they will not be disturbed.



## Consider technical aspects

Whether the patient is using a phone, smartphone, computer or tablet, suggest to the patient to check with your practice or clinic as to what may be required for the consultation when requesting an appointment. This will help ease any stress or worry they might have about any technical issues.



## Prepare a medical history

Be sure to remind the patient to gather relevant information regarding their medical history ahead of time.

Letting them know they may be asked questions about their lifestyle, job and family life and, if appropriate, their mental health history.

Like with face to face consultations, the purpose of the appointment is to provide the patient with the best possible care and treatment.



### Have information ready

Like any doctor's appointment, the patient should be ready with the following pieces of information:

- ▶ List of prescriptions (including any known allergies), over-the-counter medications and supplements.
- ▶ Pharmacy name and address.
- ▶ GP/family doctor's name and contact info.
- ▶ Health Insurance or credit/debit card information.



### Jot down questions to ask

Asking the patient to make a note of their symptoms and questions to ask in advance of the consultation may make the patient feel more relaxed when attending the telemedicine consultation.



### Write down the treatment plan

Where possible, suggest to the patient to take notes on the treatment plan and what the next steps are during the appointment.

## Explaining to the patient what is involved in a telemedicine consultation



It may be useful to explain to the patient that, just like a face to face consultation, you will ask about health concerns, take a history and conduct an appropriate examination. That you may request diagnostic tests if considered necessary and may suggest referring the patient to another doctor for further treatment. Just as in a face to face consultation, you should provide the patient with a possible diagnosis and explain the plan of management including the benefits and risks of treatment options if a treatment is suggested and ensure there is appropriate follow-up.

Let them know that their prescription will be sent, securely, electronically to their nominated pharmacy of choice where the patient can collect their medications.

Advise the patient what to do in case of an emergency or if they need medical attention between appointments.

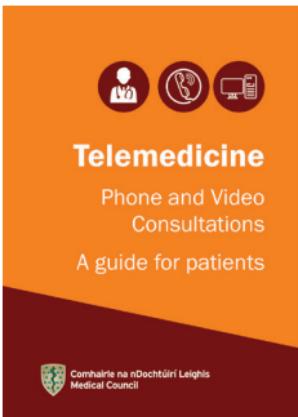
Patients have the best outcomes when their care is coordinated, they should be reminded to tell their GP if they are receiving care or advice from any other doctor, or any prescriptions from any other source regardless of format or location.



If you are a doctor providing a telemedicine consultation and you are not the patient's own GP then you should also ask for the name of the patient's general practitioner and any other healthcare providers involved in their care for the purpose of ensuring continuity of care. You should inform the patient's general practitioner of the telemedicine consultation that has taken place.



Doctors may wish to direct their patients to the Telemedicine Information Booklet for Patients. This is available online at [www.medicalcouncil.ie/  
news-and-publications/  
publications/](http://www.medicalcouncil.ie/news-and-publications/publications/)



## **What to do if a patient has concerns about the telemedicine service that is being provided by a doctor?**



A doctor has a duty of care to their patient. This applies as much in the telemedicine environment as in the doctor's office and may extend to consultants involved in the patient's care, even if they have not seen or interacted directly with the patient.

Doctors should provide the same level of care in the telemedicine environment as they would when seeing a patient face-to-face. A doctor who does not meet the standards of competence that can reasonably be expected of a medical practitioner may be subject to the complaints and disciplinary processes of the Medical Council.

Complaints relating to a telemedicine consultation should be made locally in the first instance, where appropriate.

If a patient has a concern about the service they received you should consider discussing it with the patient in the first instance as it may have arisen from a misunderstanding, pressure of time or poor communication. The patient should also be advised to contact a manager at a doctors' practice or clinic in order to make them aware of any concern and to have it resolved rapidly. Many clinics encourage patients to complete a complaint form and will respond to a patient formally in writing with an explanation after they gather the facts of the matter. Some clinics will offer the patient an appointment to meet with the doctor or receptionist for an explanation, sometimes in the company of another member of staff if the patient wishes.

## **Learning resources that are available in relation to Telemedicine**



### **The Medical Council:**

Further information in relation to Telemedicine is available within the Medical Council's Guide to Professional Conduct and Ethics:-

*The Guide to Professional Conduct and Ethics for Registered Medical Practitioners (Amended) 8th Edition 2019*

### **The Health Service Executive:**

The National COVID-19 Telehealth Steering Committee has approved to support communication and collaboration across the health service, further information is available at: <https://healthservice.hse.ie/staff/coronavirus/working-from-home/virtual-health/virtual-health.html>

The National Virtual Health Team host a series of webinars to help clinicians better understand video enabled care and further information is available at: [www.ehealthireland.ie/News-Media/Spotlight/Video-Enabled-Care-Webinar-Series.html](http://www.ehealthireland.ie/News-Media/Spotlight/Video-Enabled-Care-Webinar-Series.html)

## **National Healthcare Communication Programme**

The National Healthcare Communication Programme is designed to support healthcare staff to learn, develop and maintain their communication skills with patients, their families and with colleagues. Further information is available at <https://www.hse.ie/eng/about/our-health-service/healthcare-communication/>

## **Medisec**

<https://medisec.ie/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Factsheet-Top-Tips-for-Video-and-Telephone-Consultations.pdf>

## **Medical Protection Society**

<https://www.medicalprotection.org/uk/articles/covid-19-and-remote-consultations-how-we-can-help>

## **Postgraduate Training Bodies:**

[www.icgp.ie/go/in\\_the\\_practice/it\\_in\\_the\\_practice](http://www.icgp.ie/go/in_the_practice/it_in_the_practice)

[www.irishpsychiatry.ie/covid-19-information-and-updates-from-cpsychi/covid-19-useful-documents-and-resources/](http://www.irishpsychiatry.ie/covid-19-information-and-updates-from-cpsychi/covid-19-useful-documents-and-resources/)

[www.msurgery.ie/home/rcsi-courses/online-open-courses/](http://www.msurgery.ie/home/rcsi-courses/online-open-courses/)

[www.rcpi.ie/covid19/rcpi-podcast-series/](http://www.rcpi.ie/covid19/rcpi-podcast-series/)

You may wish to contact your postgraduate training body or your employer directly as they may have additional resources available.

We hope you found this booklet useful and that it has helped you understand what is involved in a telemedicine consultation and about our role as the Medical Council.



**If you have further questions about the  
Medical Council, please visit our website at:  
[www.medicalcouncil.ie](http://www.medicalcouncil.ie)**

**The Medical Council regulates medical doctors in the Republic of Ireland. The Council's purpose is to protect the public by promoting and better ensuring high standards of professional conduct and professional education, training and competence among doctors. The Medical Council's remit centres around the core principle of protecting patients and supporting doctors.**

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