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Weight of evidence supports continuation of telehealth

The coronavirus pandemic has vastly changed Australian lifestyles, leading to unwanted ‘COVID kilos’ for some, due to different food choices, eating habits, stress and a lack of exercise during lockdown.

But Dietitians Australia said it’s also presented an opportunity for many people to make life-changing and in some cases, life-saving choices, through better access to dietetic support via telehealth.

In March this year, the Federal Government added dietetic consultations to the COVID-19 temporary Medicare Benefits Schedule (MBS) items for telehealth services. This provided subsidised access to nutrition support for many Australians living with a chronic disease.

The Association is calling for an extension to government funded telehealth dietetic services beyond 30 September to ensure all Australians, regardless of where they live, can continue to receive high-quality nutrition care. This is backed by an [evidence-based position statement](#), published in *Nutrition & Dietetics*.

“Dietetic consultations via telephone and video conferencing have been an extremely important service to our communities during the past three months,” said Tara Diversi, Accredited Practising Dietitian and President of the Dietitians Association of Australia (DAA).

“These sessions via telehealth were found to be both cost-effective and as successful as face-to-face delivery of medical nutrition therapy for weight management, malnutrition and the management of a number of chronic health conditions.”

Many Australians have benefited from this initiative, including Harry, a budding footballer from Melbourne, to Kerri, a Gold-Coast based Paralympian seeking dietetic support to help manage her diabetes. Harry and Kerri have shared their experience (as seen in the accompanying case studies).

Access to government subsidised telehealth dietetic services begins with a referral from a GP. Between March and May 2020, there were more than 49,000 appointments for allied health practitioners under the temporary COVID-19 telehealth MBS items for chronic disease management.²

“Having Medicare subsidised telehealth consultations with dietitians has not only helped reduce the risk of coronavirus transmission, it’s allowed greater health care access for people who live in remote and regional areas, those who are time poor or find it difficult to travel,” said Tara.

“Eating the right foods to support our mental health is also crucial in this time of change.”

“It would be a detriment to the health of all Australians, if the Federal Government was to revert back to only providing Medicare and Department of Veterans’ Affairs subsidies for face-to-face appointments,” Tara said.

Nutrition-related chronic diseases are the leading cause of ill health in Australia, affecting more than seven million Australians.¹

“Increasing access to dietitians via telehealth will make it easier for Australians to put their health first and navigate the ongoing impact of COVID-19 on our lifestyles, while reducing inequality for people living in areas where face to face support isn’t as readily available,” Tara said.

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Telehealth Case studies:

For further information or to arrange an interview, contact Pattie King (0409 661 920).

Paralympian, Kerri Weston: video-conference dietetic consultation

Paralympian Kerri Weston has been working with Gold Coast Accredited Practising Dietitian Anna D’Arcy for the past 18 months to manage her diabetes.

Kerri said being able to continue dietetic consultations via telehealth throughout the coronavirus lockdown has been crucial for maintaining her health and wellbeing.

“I don’t know where I would have been, especially mentally,” Kerri said, “Being in isolation and the stress of what was going on with COVID-19, my blood sugars were higher, even though I was eating the same food. It was good to be able to talk to Anna about this, she really allayed my fears.”

Anna said the planning and conversations she has been able to have with her clients through telehealth consultations had been just as effective as face to face sessions.

“For Kerri, who is in a wheelchair, it has meant she hasn’t had to deal with transport issues and she’s made great progress, losing weight, building up her strength and maintaining glycaemic control through food, rather than medication,” Anna said.

Rising sportsman, Harry Flynn: telephone dietetic consultation

For 16-year-old Harry Flynn, having a telephone consultation with Accredited Practising Dietitian Simone Austin has put him a step closer to his goal of becoming a professional AFL player.

“It was a lot easier and more efficient because we didn’t have to drive to the other side of Melbourne for the session,” Harry said.

“Being in lockdown it’s harder not to snack, but after getting professional advice from Simone, I want to eat more whole foods, minimise chocolate and understand sports supplements because I want to play at the highest level and nutrition is vital.”

Simone spent 12 years as the Dietitian for Hawthorn Football Club, Harry’s favourite team, and said she enjoys seeing her clients do well and realise their health goals.

“What Harry is learning is a life long skill about nutrition – that will keep him in good stead not just for his sport, but for his long-term health. Prevention is better than a cure!” said Simone.

“Being able to provide telehealth consultations has meant vital continuity of care for my clients, keeping them motivated and being able to share information more regularly, without interrupting their day through having to take time away from school and work,” Simone said.

References

¹Kelly, JT, Allman-Farinelli, M, Chen, J, et al. Dietitians Australia position statement on telehealth. *Nutr Diet*. 2020; 1– 10. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1747-0080.12619>

²Medicare Benefits Schedule (2020). Requested Item Report: Medicare items processed from March 2020- May 2020 for item no. 93000 and 93013. Medicare Australia. Available from: http://medicarestatistics.humanservices.gov.au/statistics/do.jsp? PROGRAM=%2Fstatistics%2Fmbs_item_standard_report&DRILL=ag&group=93000%2C+93013&VAR=services&STAT=count&RPT_FMT=by+state&PTYPE=month&START_DT=202003&END_DT=202005

Nutrition & Dietetics Journal

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