

Telehealth: Connecting with BC Physicians Online

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Telemedicine is a rapidly expanding sector of healthcare delivery being used worldwide that has now come to British Columbians through businesses like Livecare, Telus Health, and Medeo.¹ Medeo is one of two Vancouver-based companies that allows you to connect with a physician using your computer, phone, or tablet.^{1,2}


Patients with a valid Medical Services Plan register with Medeo online, and are then ready to schedule an appointment with a BC family physician. Before the appointment, patients type in their symptoms, medications, allergies, general medical information, and are encouraged to attach photos or other necessary files for review. If their general practitioner is not registered with Medeo, they can choose from Medeo's database of registered physicians on call. To ensure information safety, Medeo uses "bank-grade Canadian data centers to provide a secure connection for the patient-physician interaction and for all patient data".² The virtual clinic is open from 7am-10pm on weekdays and 9am-3pm on Saturdays but is closed on Sundays. For senior citizens, Medeo is available through a specialized tablet designed for use by this age demographic, the Claris Companion. In addition, there is a Medeo iPhone app to help users connect to the service.²

"Any interaction that requires a physical examination, Medeo will not work for," states Medeo spokesman James Basnett.³ In contrast, Livecare simulates a physical exam as patients are required to visit specialized clinics where technicians can record vital signs and collect other diagnostic information that allow physicians to make diagnoses.⁴ Medeo intends its services for visits involving prescription reviews, specialist referrals, patient education, medical questions, or chronic disease follow-up. Telehealth extends far beyond one-to-one patient care: Medeo's services, for instance, allow colleagues to collaborate across the province to provide coordinated patient care.² With 60 Medeo physicians registered as of summer of 2013, it appears telehealth companies have found a new way to connect physicians with their patients.³

Telemedicine has been growing in use across Canadian provinces, with usage being tracked by the Canadian Telehealth Report.⁵ The 2013 report states that eight Canadian jurisdictions, including British Columbia, currently use desktop and mobile video conferencing for clinical consultations with patients, and with this use, health regions saved an estimated \$915,000 in

emergency department visit costs and \$20 million in inpatient costs. Approximately 73% of telehealth clinical sessions were provided in the areas of mental health (including psychiatry, addictions, and forensic mental health), internal medicine, and oncology, with the highest per capita use in Northern areas such as the Yukon, Northwest Territories, and Nunavut.⁵

Medeo Corp believes their service will be particularly useful for patients with reduced mobility due to age or chronic conditions, to those in rural and remote locations in Canada with limited access to specialist care, and in connecting rural and urban physicians.² However, as the Canadian Medical Protection Association points out, it also presents new medico-legal issues around information security, privacy, and patient consent.⁶ Initial studies in other provinces have found patients improved in health management behaviours, psychological well-being, and self-rated health, while others have noted that limitations to telemedicine provision include risk to the patient-physician relationship and increased as opposed to decreased appointment time due to technological barriers and loadtime.^{6,7} Finally, it can be difficult to assess certain clinical parameters without being at the bedside, as was found in glaucoma care, for instance.⁸ The Cochrane Library found that though people self-monitoring at home or having video consultations were satisfied with the experience, there is not yet enough evidence to speak to the effects on health outcomes or costs of the expensive and necessary technology. Cochrane, in conclusion, noted that further research is needed.⁹

In the year 2014, it looks like telemedicine is coming to British Columbians. Are you on board? 

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