

Ministry of Health
Making Virtual Care Accessible to All Ontarians

Issue Statement:

How can the Ministry of Health maintain health care accessibility for Ontarians in a time of crisis, with the long-term goal of improving equitable access to health care for all Ontarians?

Background Information:*COVID-19 Pandemic Impact on Health Care Delivery:*

- On March 11th 2020, the World Health Organization declared the COVID-19 outbreak a pandemic with a state of emergency declared in Ontario on March 17th 2020.
- To reduce community spread of COVID-19 and alleviate pressure on hospitals, health care appointments transitioned to virtual delivery, leaving only crucial treatments and procedures to be delivered in-person.
 - According to Canada Health Infoway, the proportion of primary care appointments conducted virtually increased 56 percentage points during the COVID-19 pandemic, emphasizing the need for virtual care options.
- According to a 2019 report from the Premier's Council, Ontario's health system is facing pressures in capacity and does not have the resources to cope with a projected increase in complex care requirements or short-and long-term capacity pressures.
 - Ontario Health has advised hospitals to accept patients from outside their regions due to the overwhelming demand on the hospital system during the COVID-19 crisis.

Virtual Care in Ontario:

- Demand for virtual care options in Ontario is on the rise.
 - A survey done in 2018 by the Canadian Medical Association indicated that 69% of respondents would opt for a virtual visit to a doctor if given the option.
 - According to the Ontario Telemedicine Network, over 1 million virtual care events took place in Ontario in 2020, marking a 36% growth in demand for services.
 - The Ontario eConsult Program has sent over 64,000 eConsults to patients in the past 12 months (as of October 2020).
- Virtually delivered health care services are essential for Ontarians living in remote communities, where access to medical professionals is limited.
- The federal government has committed \$1.75 billion to a Universal Broadband Fund to ensure access to high-speed internet in rural and remote communities in Canada, facilitating equitable access to virtual health care services for all Ontarians.

Key Considerations:*Benefits of Enhancing Virtual Care Options in Ontario:*

- Virtual care has the potential to increase accessibility to health care services to those in remote communities.
 - A report by the North American Observatory (NAO) reported that robotic technology to support virtual care needs reduced costs of medical transport of patients in remote communities by 60%.
 - The NAO also cites a report that indicated 87% of patients were able to avoid a work absence when virtual care was available.
- The Carrier First Nation in British Columbia reported an increase in continuity of care when video conferencing was an option for contacting primary care providers.
- A study of 35,000 patients in a Massachusetts-based Accountable Care Organization found that virtual visits reduced face-to-face visits by 33%, but increased total visits by 80% in a 3-year period, meaning virtual services made health care more accessible.
- Enhancing virtual care options supports the goals of the *Simpler, Faster, Better Services Act, 2019*, from the provincial government to make services accessible for all Ontarians.

- It also supports the “Digital First for Health” initiative outlined in the province’s 2020-2021 Ministry of Health Overview Plan.
- The Ontario Onwards Action Plan aims to make services to Ontarians more customer focused, digitally- driven, and efficient. One of its goals is to make 70% of services Ontarians use most, including health care, available online by 2022.

Limitations of Virtual Care:

- Online delivery of care may exacerbate inequalities for select communities.
 - Accessibility to Broadband Internet connectivity and devices are needed to facilitate virtual health care appointments.
- Specific procedures and evaluations may require an in-person delivery.

Approaches in Other Jurisdictions to Enhance Virtual Care in Response to COVID-19:

- The British Columbia Interior Health Authority has provided Zoom licences to health care providers to conduct virtual appointments.
- Alberta launched a tele-advice portal to give advice to physicians caring for presumed and confirmed COVID-19 patients.

Implementation and Policy Considerations:

Policy Shifts to Support Virtual Care in Ontario:

- In 2019 a report from the Premier’s Council indicated that innovation, including virtual options for health care delivery, was integral for eliminating the challenge of “hallway health care”.
 - The report also recommended changes to the *Personal Health Information Protection Act* to improve the access to personal health information while keeping information secure.
 - E-referrals, standards for patient information sharing, and supports for patients in navigating a virtual system were recommended.
- Data encryption and mandatory security protocols need to be developed to ensure the privacy of patient information.
- Regulated central systems to collect, store, and integrate patient data are required to ensure continuity of care and accurate data access.
- The Canadian Medical Association indicated in a report that many provinces indicate in their billing guidelines that a physician must personally carry out or directly supervise a procedure for it to be billable to provincial insurance plans, which imposes a barrier to access telemedicine.

Addressing Equity in Virtual Health Care Delivery:

- The NAO reports that there may be challenges associated with consistent access to virtual care in northern communities due to extreme weather conditions.
- Programs to ensure required devices to participate in virtual care sessions are accessible to all Ontarians should be planned.
- Virtual care literacy supports for users should be developed to ensure Ontarians are able to use virtual care options to their fullest capacity.
 - An increase in information technology staff and supports will be needed to facilitate an increase in virtual care delivery.
- Robust infrastructure investment is required to provide equitable health care.
 - Remote, rural, and northern communities would need significant investment in infrastructure.

Economic Factors:

- Alternative revenue generating opportunities for health care institutions should be considered, as income from services including parking fees will decrease.
- Ensure capital investment strategies for health care align with the long-term goal of having accessible, virtual care options for all Ontarians.
- According to a publication from Deloitte, an estimated \$30 billion in benefits have been accrued since 2007 from virtual health solutions in Canada.