



Using Telemedicine in Psychiatry

Dr. Raj Bhatla

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Case Study

When there aren't enough doctors to go around, it's time to find a creative alternative to actually going around.

Dr. Raj Bhatla, Chief of Psychiatry at the Royal Ottawa Health Care Group, found that even within a local catchment area, removing travel time from a busy specialist's schedule means a lot more service for a lot more patients.

"Especially in mental health, there's a lot of need and not enough psychiatry professionals to help with that need," Dr. Bhatla explains. "Anything that's more efficient from a provider point-of-view allows more people to be seen - which is crucial."

Dr. Bhatla's adoption of telemedicine within his practice - and among the other doctors he practices with - began from the need simply to serve more patients within a relatively tight radius around Ottawa. While his group serves patients as far away as the Yukon, the majority of their appointments are from closer in - Brockville, Kingston, even Carleton Place. Even locally, Dr. Bhatla points out, "driving and parking can add a significant amount of time to your day, even within an urban centre. So you can actually see more patients - which is actually our core business - as opposed to spending more time travelling."

The range of patients Dr. Bhatla's group sees by telemedicine is remarkably diverse, including Major Depression, Anxiety disorders, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, Substance Abuse and Dependence, Bipolar disorders, Schizophrenia and OCD. "The range is pretty broad actually," Dr. Bhatla points out, stressing that telemedicine has

to be used only when it is an appropriate option for the patient in question. "For me, Telemedicine is not a religion, it is an option. But I think overall, there are more uses and it is more acceptable than most clinicians would really recognize."

And knowing the emotional struggles his patients face, removing the stress of travel makes a difference. "Travel time is really not helpful for anyone."

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The worst case scenario is when travel concerns result in mental health care not being delivered to patients who could benefit from it. "Sometimes patients just forego the opportunity to receive mental health consultation or follow-ups from psychiatry because the logistics are just too tough for them," Dr. Bhatla explains, reiterating how the focus needs to be on providing care that is sensitive to patients' schedules, work life and family life. "These are very important issues as we continue to evolve and develop more patient-centered care."

"It's important to recognize that telemedicine is changing quickly as well," Dr. Bhatla points out, eager to talk about where telemedicine is headed, and not just where it's been. "We're starting to

use Personal Videoconferencing which is very, very convenient.” With simple ‘plug-n-play’ set up, Personal Videoconferencing allows doctors to connect a webcam and speakerphone to their personal computer or laptop, and avoid even the simple process of travelling to a nearby telemedicine studio. “I can do it from, frankly, wherever I am,” he says excitedly. “It’s very convenient, and certainly where I think we’ll be going in the future more and more.”

“It’s a challenge, at times, to get a psychiatrist to where the hearings are happening. You can actually participate in a hearing via OTN, and allow that whole process to happen.

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Beyond the more expected patient consults, psychiatry presents a number of unique demands on a specialist’s time. The Consent and Capacity Board has been created to help patients who have been hospitalized on an involuntary basis, or when a psychiatrist feels they are not capable of making their own treatment decisions. “In Ontario, all patients have the right to a hearing if they disagree with that finding,” says Dr. Bhatla, explaining that a tribunal made up of a psychiatrist, a lawyer and a community member must be brought together to resolve these issues in the best interests of the patient.

More service, to more patients.

Similarly, psychiatrists can provide mental health evaluations or follow-ups within the criminal justice system through telemedicine, and Dr. Bhatla frequently works with patients at the Monteith Correctional Complex near Timmins from his desk in Ottawa. “Obviously they have a lot of restrictions on their movements, being incarcerated,” Dr. Bhatla explains, emphasizing not only to the distances involved if patients or doctors needed to travel, but the added complexity and expense of having inmates travel with an escort if they had to receive treatment elsewhere. “As a society, we owe vulnerable and marginalized populations access to good quality healthcare, including mental health care. These are people who are no less deserving than anyone else.”

Personal Videoconferencing users (increase) over time

