Telehealth trial delivers more services for patients and savings for Government

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Ground breaking telehealth technology has resulted in more remote and regional Territorians getting the medical advice they need without having to always travel to major centres.

Figures released today reveal patient consultations with doctors using telehealth have soared from about 200 a year to more than 1000 under a Northern Territory Government trial project.

Visiting the Alice Springs Hospital today, Chief Minister Adam Giles said the telehealth program had received support from both patients and health professionals, and delivered savings to government of more than $1.1 million.

“Since the Country Liberals came to office in 2012, we have worked hard to ensure all Territorians have better access to health care no matter where they live,” he said.

“For people living in urban areas, a visit to the doctor is fairly straightforward but for people living in remote areas, it can be quite costly and mean being away from home, school or work for days.

“The trial project has expanded the availability of the telehealth system - which connects patients and doctors via video enabled technology – at sites at Alice Springs, Katherine and Tennant Creek.

“The results of the trial have shown a massive increase in the use of telehealth – up 737% in Tennant Creek (62 attendances in 2013/14 to 519 between July 2014 and September 2015), up 481% in Alice Springs (from 33 to 192 attendances) and up 231% in Katherine (from 100 to 331 attendances).

“This is a fantastic achievement and demonstrates that telehealth is delivering better health outcomes in regional and remote communities and reducing the need for patients to travel long distances to access health services.

“It’s also helped reduce costs to the Patient Travel Assistance Scheme budget with savings estimated of at least $1.189 million on travel costs alone, while the rate of patients not attending their appointments was substantially lower than for standard hospital outpatient clinics.”
The trial project leader Dr Sam Goodwin is the Acting Executive Director of Medical and Clinical Services at the Alice Springs Hospital and said at the end of the trial more patients were accessing Telehealth, rather than use the Patient Travel Assistance Scheme.

“Telehealth is good for patients and health professionals, and is delivering efficiencies for the health system,” Dr Goodwin said.

“Clinicians on the frontline have summarised the Telehealth pilot very nicely – ‘it is not often you can say that you have saved money and everyone has got really good health care for that saving, and you are not losing anything – usually when you make savings of money you have lost something’, he said.

Health Minister John Elferink said an evaluation report into the telehealth trial had recommended the project continue and that the telehealth network be developed further until the services are embedded into routine practice.

“Telehealth services clearly have an important and growing role to play in ensuring more Territorians get more access to the health care they need,” he said.

“The types of specialist appointments available through telehealth at the trial sites have included cardiac, orthopaedic, haematology, oncology, dermatology and urology, to name just a few, with the types of available services regularly being added to as part of the trial project.

“The Government will now consider the recommendations of the evaluation report and look at what resources and training we need to provide to extend the use of telehealth services in the Territory.”

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