Learning from COVID-19 to improve access to physiotherapy

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Abstract. Funding for telehealth should continue post-COVID-19 and should include provision for tele-physiotherapy. There are several instances where tele-physiotherapy may be an appropriate form of primary care, including the early management of acute pain, which may otherwise become chronic. By extending the availability of tele-physiotherapy beyond 30 September 2020, we can improve the health of the population generally and, in particular, better serve remote or otherwise isolated people.

Additional keywords: primary health care, rural health.
pain transitioning to chronic pain, thereby contributing to a reduction in the community disease burden of this latter very common and debilitating condition. Similarly, patients who have had an initial face-to-face consult with a physiotherapist, may benefit from follow-up sessions via tele-physiotherapy, where, for instance, their movements or exercises can be assessed, corrected or progressed. This approach may be particularly beneficial for patients living in rural and remote areas, also reducing geographical healthcare disparities.

The historical lack of acceptance of tele-physiotherapy has meant that research regarding its effective administration is limited compared with other health services. Such research is nevertheless on the increase. For example, a recent systematic review and meta-analysis of real-time tele-physiotherapy for patients with primary musculoskeletal conditions showing that tele-physiotherapy was superior to conventional physiotherapy in terms of function and disability, and comparable in effectiveness for pain outcomes (Cottrell et al. 2017). Developing the evidence base for the provision of tele-physiotherapy should be a priority to inform the optimisation of these important services. By extending the availability of tele-physiotherapy beyond 30 September 2020, and increasing flexibility and training in tele-physiotherapy, we can improve the health of the population generally and, in particular, better serve remote or otherwise isolated people.

Conflicts of interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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