

Teledentistry: Bridging the kilometres between you and your patients



Teledentistry remains as relevant as ever. As of 2021, the global market for these services was valued at around \$1.2 billion (USD). Additionally, the momentum shows no signs of slowing down. Grand View Research projects that this market will grow worldwide at a compound annual growth rate of more than 16% between now and 2030¹.

These statistics align seamlessly with similar growth indicators in all things “virtual,” especially across disciplines in medical circles. The Canadian Institute for Health Information reports that health care delivered “virtually” or remotely has rapidly expanded across most care sectors in our country. In fact, they noted that as of March 2022, around *half* of our fellow Canadians had been offered virtual visits in addition to their “regular” offline service offerings. And, between January 2021 and March 2022, *one-third* of all patient-reported visits were virtual. Telemedicine activity during this period, notably, *remained above its pre-pandemic levels*².

Food for thought for your practice

Given the transformative nature and traction associated with virtual care across sectors, there is no time like now to revisit your teledentistry services. If you no longer promote or

push these services, it is a great time to take another look at them and intentionally expand and improve upon your remote capabilities.

Likewise, if you were a “late-adopter” and never really dipped your toes into teledentistry, do not be left behind by your early-adopter competition. Build your menu of services, deliver them virtually, and market them extensively.

A good place to start strengthening, expanding, and communicating your teledentistry programme is to “borrow” from the very drivers noted by the above researchers.

These drivers behind the growth in telehealth services also represent the teledentistry benefits that you can market to your patients and the broader community:

- Comfort and widespread usage of mobile devices
- Expansion of solid network and broadband capacity
- Heightened familiarity with new remote concepts of delivering medicine (think: Zoom, only for health care)
- Knowledge of vulnerabilities in public health care and heightened interest in safety standards and practices
- Convenience and flexibility in delivering care
- Ability to reach underserved populations
- Complementary support for teams amid staggering workforce shortages to ensure continuity of quality care
- Perceived value and affordability benefits as products and services have generally skyrocketed with historic rates of inflation

Teledentistry is ready-made to be positioned as a convenient, hassle-free, comfortable, and cost-effective alternative to traditional visits. And many types of services are appropriate for remote dental care.

In a 2022 study of nearly 2,800 dental providers conducted by CareQuest Institute for Oral Health, the scope of survey respondents’ teledentistry practices was vast³. It included:

- Triage of cases
- Guidance on emergent cases
- Full consultations
- Follow-up appointments
- Education on oral health, hygiene, products, and treatment options

- Patient monitoring
- Treatment planning
- Prescribing medications
- Receiving and reviewing photos in preparation for smile assessments and, ultimately, in-person procedures

Inventory how you currently “use” available meeting platforms and telecom. See how your existing services compare to the ones listed above. There may be opportunities to expand the use of teledentistry into other services, which should be marketed as a launch, not unlike how you might market a new laser-assisted procedure or new doctor, assistant, hygienist, or treatment coordinator.

As you conduct an audit of your teledentistry offerings, assess the current technologies that are being used. *Are they where you want or need them to be to ensure the highest quality and most responsive visit possible?* If not, then you will likely need to get your software or hardware up to speed.

This could simply mean consulting with a vendor to unlock other features or capabilities linked to your virtual meeting platforms, or it could mean a new or updated solution entirely. Investments in these technologies are vital, partly because they have so many applications. They may be used to connect with staff, peers, partners, and other members of your community. The appropriate infrastructure can help to bridge the kilometres and build more hours into the day. So, there are considerable implications for one’s practice operations.

A few other “pro tips” to communicate the launch or “re-launch” of your virtual dental care programme include:

- Whenever possible, share real stories from actual patients. Let them do the talking and rave about how easy and helpful it was for them to get the guidance and care that they needed from the comfort of their couch.
- Address the potential concerns, myths, or uncertainty about the process head-on. Get into the mind of the patient, or more generally, of “technophobes.” Here, it might be valuable to isolate a few of the most Frequently Asked Questions about teledentistry services you and your staff have encountered. Then, you can go point by point and address each source of confusion and queries.
- Be aware that marketing technology, *any type of tech*, is not the same as marketing, a perhaps more tangible addition to your practice. There are unique challenges and opportunities associated with explaining and conveying the merits of the tech.

- Notably, new tech can be scary for clinicians and “laypeople” alike. The good news is the technology is *actionable*. You can use screenshots of a virtual meeting or record portions of a meeting to convey how it works and how easy it is for patients to get connected. Doing so enhances the patient’s understanding and willingness to try the “scary” tech. Just be sure to avoid getting too in the weeds when explaining certain things, like the platforms you use. Ultimately, anyone with a mobile device and a good network connection should be able to easily access and become an adopter and champion of this service!

Which brings us to a final point: The dentists featured in the CareQuest study championed teledentistry’s capacity to help them to support the underserved and their healthcare needs better. These potential patients may not have easy access to the devices or connections mentioned above. So, it is also important to communicate and market to the younger demographic, those caregivers or children and grandchildren who can be the best advocates for their senior family members.

These family members may lack familiarity, enthusiasm, and comfort with technology. This helps to ensure individuals with mobility or other challenges to getting in-person visits can stay on top of those consults and other services that are appropriate for the virtual realm or that present just the jumpstart needed to get back into a healthy routine of regular office visits.

Better engage with families, neighbours, and communities, and enhance your quality of care and service with a little help from teledentistry.

References

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 3. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC9101983/>
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