



## **Improving access to specialist services through Medicare rebates for video consultations**

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Under the Federal Government's major telehealth initiative Connecting Health Services with the Future: Modernising Medicare by Providing Rebates for Online Consultations, Medicare rebates will be available from 1 July 2011 for video consultations across a range of medical specialties. This initiative will address some of the barriers to access to specialist services for Australians in regional, remote and outer metropolitan areas.

Telehealth facilities located in general practices, aged care facilities and Aboriginal Medical Services will use video conferencing technology to link patients in regional, remote and outer metropolitan areas with specialists in cities or major regional centres. The patient may, if clinically necessary, be supported by their GP or other health care professional. The role of these support practitioners will be to assist the specialist and to facilitate the long distance consultation.

Video consultations will, in many cases, provide patients with access to specialists sooner than would otherwise be the case, and without the time and expense involved in travelling to major cities. They will be of particular benefit to patients in aged care facilities and those requiring relatively minor but necessary out-of-hospital consultations including follow-up consultations, post-operative assessments, discussion of diagnostic test results and medication monitoring.

While it is generally recognised that face-to-face consultations are the optimal form of patient care, there is a strong case for video consultations to be included in the range of options available to patients and medical practitioners as part of comprehensive care. Internationally, there are many examples of successful integration of telehealth into clinical practice, and in Australia, where there are vast distances between patients in remote communities and medical specialists who are largely concentrated in urban areas, telehealth presents opportunities for improved access to specialist care.