

COVID-19 - Practising telemedicine in the pandemic

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The rapid evolution of the COVID-19 pandemic currently affecting most parts of the world has caused many to worry about their health and the health of their loved ones. The World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a pandemic on March 11, 2020. As of March 13, 2020, the Government of Quebec declared a health emergency throughout the territory of Québec. At a population level, we have seen ourselves forced to change the way we live by practicing "social distancing". For physicians, this has caused the necessary and rapid shift in how we deliver care to our patients through the implementation of telemedicine. The Québec provincial Medicare provider, the Régie de l'Assurance Maladie du Québec (RAMQ), has implemented remuneration for physicians providing services via telemedicine. Until now, providing care through telemedicine has been uncharted territory for most physicians. There is currently no formal training in the medical school or postgraduate curriculum on how to deliver telemedicine, which was one of the main reasons this guide was created.

Many of the provincial medical orders have recently published guidelines pertaining to the practice of telemedicine (2-6). The College des Médecins du Québec for example, defines telemedicine as "the practice of medicine at a distance using information and communication technologies" (1). "The College reiterates that physicians who provide care via telemedicine will be held to the same ethical and professional standards during a teleconsultation as during an in-person consultation, with respect to the quality of the professional relationship, professional secrecy, consent, follow-up and record keeping. A teleconsultation does not obviate the need for a patient history and physical examination. Furthermore, it is important to remember that the physician must assume full civil liability at all times and make his or her diagnosis with the greatest care, using appropriate scientific methods" (1).

This **telemedicine tool** was quickly developed, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, to support physicians and residents practicing telemedicine at the Herzi Family Medicine Centre's academic family medicine unit (Montreal, Québec). In order to reduce community transmission during the COVID-19 pandemic and prevent the spread of the virus, practicing telemedicine and avoiding in-office visits is imperative.

The tool provides a basic overview on how to carry out a telemedicine visit. The last page was created to guide physicians when assessing patients with viral symptoms to avoid these patients from presenting to the clinic.

It is fundamental that this means of delivering care to patients, despite the context of the pandemic, maintains as much as possible the usual standards of care that govern the practice of medicine (7).

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References

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