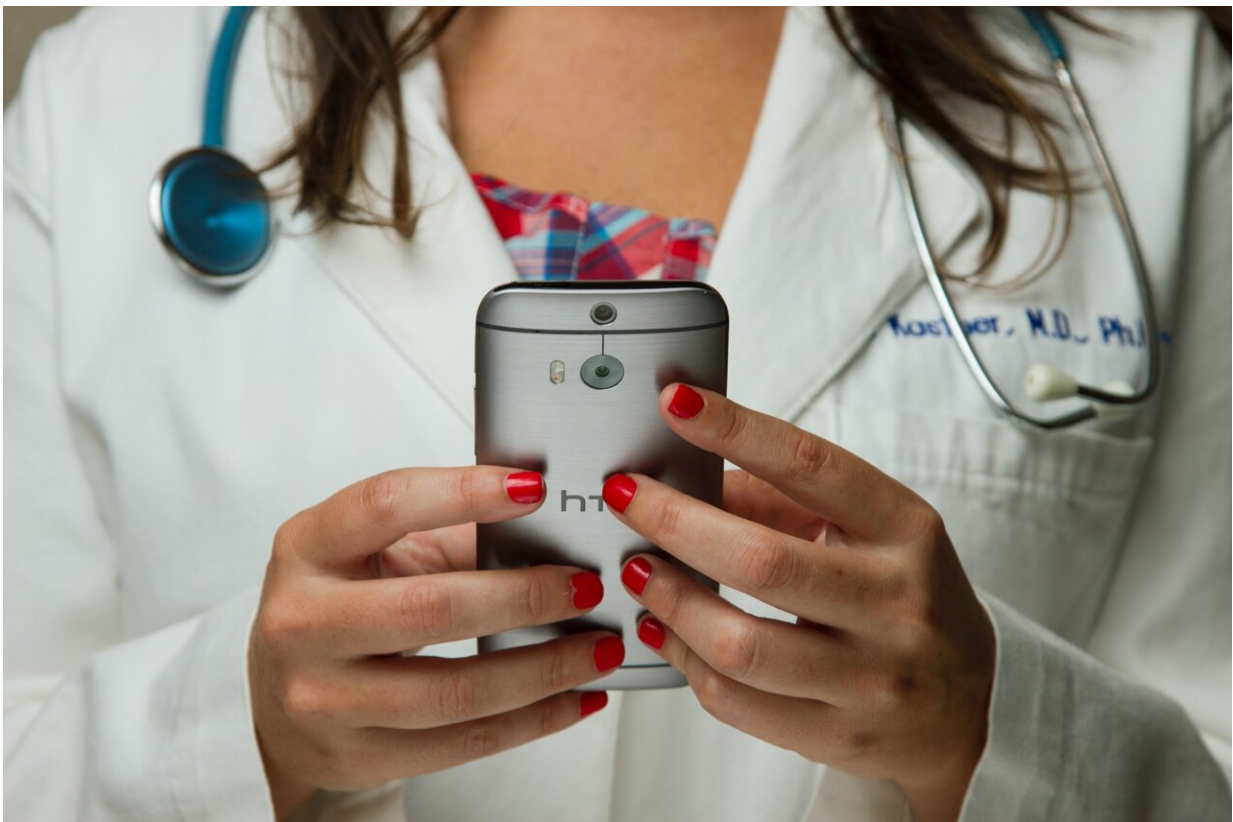


Greater adoption of telemedicine could reap benefits for the Canadian economy of nearly CAD 6bn annually

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Increasing the use of telemedicine in Canada through teleconsultations between patients and their primary care provider could lead to benefits

for patients, society and the economy, according to a new report released today from the not-for-profit research organization RAND Europe. The economic value of time saved, through fewer hours spent on traveling to appointments and waiting, could be up to CAD 5bn alone each year.

The study's evidence review showed that telemedicine can make it easier and more convenient for patients to engage with their healthcare providers, leading to more flexible and real-time care and, with some health conditions, can lead to better patient outcomes. Telemedicine can overcome geographic barriers and be particularly beneficial for patients in rural and Indigenous communities where there is a shortage of doctors.

The study also suggests that telemedicine could benefit the Canadian health system through more efficient types of consultations, fewer missed appointments and reducing unnecessary use of emergency care services.

Researchers put an economic value on the time saved by comparing a potential increase in teleconsultations in primary care settings to a baseline corresponding to pre-COVID-19 use. They used a macroeconomic model using data from the Canadian economy to calculate the cost.

Some of the time saved will have a [positive effect](#) on productivity, such as through fewer working hours lost, and some will increase available leisure time. The analysis showed that an increased uptake of 50% could lead to economic savings of up to CAD 5bn annually for Canada.

"The reduced need to travel and the potential reduction in waiting time for patients are important convenience factors and also result in potentially positive effects on the wider economy," said Marco Hafner, the study's lead author and a senior economist at RAND Europe.

"However, for some people and types of health conditions, replacing face-to-face consultations with remote consultations will not be suitable."

The researchers further calculated the direct healthcare cost savings that could result from fewer [emergency department](#) visits and missed appointments if teleconsultations could be offered to patients. For example, if 50% of unnecessary emergency department visits and missed appointments could be averted, the Canadian healthcare system would save up to CAD 150m as a result.

A final analysis applied an emerging valuation method that considers the intangible benefits or "welfare gains" that people experience by having a primary care provider available to them¹. At least 3% of Canadians report that they do not have a regular doctor available in their local area and cite long waiting times and distance and transportation as major barriers to accessing care. The researchers estimated that if 50% of this population could be provided access to a family doctor through teleconsultations, the aggregated wellbeing value across Canada would be CAD 600m per year.

The study recommends several actions that could be taken to improve access to telemedicine. Many of these recommendations are applicable internationally. Of relevance for Canada is the national harmonization of electronic medical records, the improvement of digital literacy skills for practitioners and patients and the modification of the physician fee system. The report also found that closer cooperation among key Canadian stakeholders could help ensure universal access to telemedicine, especially in remote and Indigenous communities.

Hafner says that "despite governments temporarily lifting some barriers to allow the broader use of telemedicine, the COVID-19 pandemic has emphasized the presence of many remaining challenges. Several existing

barriers would have to be addressed to support a more sustained uptake in telemedicine after COVID-19 and unlock some of the potential associated with its increased use."

This research, prepared for TELUS, was subject to RAND Europe's rigorous evaluation and quality review process, and does not imply endorsement of any product or service. RAND Europe independently conducted the analyses performed and presented in this report and had full editorial control.

More information: Report:
www.rand.org/pubs/research_briefs/RBA1274-1.html

Provided by RAND Corporation

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