



Professor Richard Turner,
specialist general surgeon

University of Tasmania: Teaching telehealth to tomorrow's doctors for better patient safety

When COVID made its way to Australia in 2020, specialist general surgeon and academic, Professor Richard Turner turned Australia's COVID restrictions into an opportunity to train final year medical students in telehealth.

Professor Turner's project, 'Teaching telehealth for tomorrow: A telehealth simulation program for Australia's future healthcare workforce', addresses two main challenges:

- **Increased demand for telehealth, due to the pandemic.** As telehealth becomes part of the 'blended care' of a contemporary healthcare setting, doctors need to deliver it safely and effectively. Training final year medical students will ensure proficiency and confidence in telehealth consultations to meet these demands.
- **Reduced clinical placement opportunities for final year students.** Due to lockdowns and restrictions, the hospital and community placements that comprise a major part of a medical student's training were greatly restricted, and face-to-face non-urgent consultations were cancelled, increasing the need to telehealth.

Moving towards 'blended care'

There is no well-established telemedicine curriculum in undergraduate years, so Professor Turner and his project team realised that telehealth simulations using well-trained simulated patients portraying authentic clinical scenarios, prefaced by a suitable briefing on the topic, would be the ideal solution.

"Even without COVID, many service providers are discovering that telehealth makes for more efficient throughput and improved compliance with outpatient attendances," Professor Turner says.

"Junior doctors have been at the forefront of telehealth service delivery, with many hospital and community follow-up and surveillance clinics providing telephone or camera-enabled consultations. The education of medical students must therefore include proficiency in telehealth consultation skills, where safety and patient-centred care are paramount."

Unlike the face-to-face, diagnosis-focused consultations students are used to, the main objective of telehealth is triaging a patient's problem and keeping them safe.

"Management is more about 'disposition' than 'treatment'," Professor Turner explains. "Patient-centred care includes the novel concept of 'digital warmth'. We have aimed to emphasise all of these aspects in our telehealth education package."

Telehealth training in medical schools and hospitals

Partners supporting the project include the Tasmanian state government service facilitator, Telehealth Tasmania, the Postgraduate Medical Education Council of Tasmania and the National Telehealth Summit.

Professor Turner hopes this may lead to inclusion of telehealth training in health education policy and hospital internships.

"The project will influence health education policy in the university sector by consolidating the place of our model for telehealth training in medical school curricula around the country, pending refinements informed by evaluation. In the hospital sector, through partnerships with Telehealth Tasmania and the Postgraduate Medical Education Council of Tasmania, an adapted version of the model may also become a mandatory requirement of Internship."

Funding support from the Avant Foundation provided to the University of Tasmania will enable Professor Turner and the team to:

- purchase basic home-monitoring equipment, so students can teach patients how to use them
- conduct transcription and analysis of stakeholder interviews
- hire two experts to deliver the telehealth teaching program.

The program was completed in May 2023 and Professor Turner hopes a successful 'proof-of-concept' will justify ongoing budgetary allocation for telehealth teaching in the University of Tasmania's medicine program.