

# ADVOCACY

## HOW CLINICIANS ADVOCATED FOR AND ADAPTED TO A TELEHEALTH MODEL DURING THE COVID19 PANDEMIC

The COVID-19 pandemic hit private practice physiotherapists like a tsunami; there were rumblings of trouble coming and then, within a week of initial adaptations, most clinics suspended most or all of their in-clinic services.

Many private practice physiotherapists quickly realized that providing telehealth or virtual physiotherapy services was going to be essential to business survival during the initial phases of the COVID19 pandemic. For many clinic owners this meant changing many, if not all, of their systems such as scheduling, intake/consent form completion, charting and billing practices. Additionally, most owners also had to determine which telehealth platform best met their needs, learn the system and then teach it to their staff. They worked diligently to do all of this while managing shifting human resource capacity, financial obligations, delivering telehealth care and managing their own personal life challenges (childcare, financial strain etc).

Several ad-hoc groups formed between clinic owners; traditionally competitors, these owners came together to help one another decipher public health guidance, make decisions, access programs/products and more. Additionally, they served as a lifeline for many of the owners to be able to have candid conversations with others in similar situations. The adaptation to a collaborative model for the collective good was a real positive spin-off of the chaos during the COVID19 pandemic onset. Nationally, there was also a move toward the collective with several large FaceBook groups forming to allow information and resource sharing fluidly across the country.

Of course, setting up a telehealth practice was a great adaptation for physiotherapists to make; however, its success relied on clients “buying in” to the process. Physiotherapists advocated for the role of telehealth in two important ways:

- Client education: clients needed to be informed of the benefits of telehealth physiotherapy. Many physiotherapists took to their websites and social media to educate the public about the efficacy of this delivery mode.
- Insurer lobbying: some clients will and do pay for service “out of pocket” but many rely on their third party insurance to cover some or all of the cost. Many individual physiotherapists spent countless hours on the phone with insurers to ensure policies would honour their clients’ physiotherapy coverage if delivered virtually.

Telehealth as a delivery mode for health services is not new. Widespread use of telehealth in private practice physiotherapy is new. Direct in-person care will likely always be the hallmark of private practice physiotherapy; however, with the adaptation to and advocacy for telehealth physiotherapy, it is likely here to stay as part of the landscape of care options for clients. Its presence should help increase access and decrease risk associated with the utilization of physiotherapy services, which is a great positive outcome of the COVID19 pandemic.

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