

Mobility and exercise programs: Cardiac failure rehabilitation group exercise program

What telehealth intervention do you provide at your service?

Host site physiotherapist – Rita: With our group-based program, we can see all the patients within their home. So, we can see up to three participants at one time and the participants can see the clinician at the hospital as well as see one another. So, we try and mimic the program to what we normally deliver at the hospital. So, where they can exercise in a safe environment as well as support one another. To get the patients set up measuring a lot of their vital signs before the start of their exercise class will probably take about 10 minutes. It's what we normally do in our exercise class at the hospital. Before they start of the session, we will ask them to measure and monitor their vital signs so it's no different.

What equipment do you use for your telehealth group exercise programs?

Host site physiotherapist – Rita: The equipment provided depends on what the patient has got. Some of them might already have access to exercise equipment or monitoring equipment. In that case we don't need to provide additional monitoring equipment.

Some of the patients already have access to internet and a computer. Again, in that case we don't need to provide additional equipment. Some of the patients might need the additional equipment to be on loan to them.

So, when we set the patient up for their telerehab exercise program, we normally deliver a package of information. We might give them a computer booklet about how to use the computer equipment and the monitoring equipment. We also give them a patient information booklet about the exercise component.

Some of the monitoring equipment includes a blood pressure machine, a pulse oximeter to measure their heart rate and their oxygen level. As part of their exercise training, we also supply them with free weights. We could use water weights and that way we can adjust the level of resistance training or therabands so they can do both upper and lower limb strength training.

What technology did you use for this telehealth intervention?

Host site physiotherapist – Rita: We chose a video conferencing platform called Adobe Connect and the reason that we have chosen that particular platform is for a few reasons. Firstly, I wanted to find a platform that's low-cost, readily available, that allows patients with slow internet access – so low bandwidth – and that's got quite secure encryption. So, being able to look at those criteria, I tapped into the resources of my local telehealth coordinator to find the right platform to deliver this kind of program. I also chose a program that allows real-time two-way communication between the patient and myself. So, I can see how the patient is doing their exercises. I can correct them if they are not doing that correctly, and I can progress their exercises as they get better. Also, the patients can see one another as well, so they can provide that peer support to one another.

We did encounter some technical difficulties. There were some incidences of some internet dropouts, auditory feedback, and some echoing. But the patients are very resilient. They are very good at getting reconnected and by the end of the program they are becoming more technical savvy than I am.

Do you have to modify your intervention to provide it via telehealth?

Host site physiotherapist – Rita: I guess with telehealth, it's quite a different way of delivering an exercise program. As a physio, I'm very used to doing hands on technique. So, when I run a telehealth session, I will have to do it in quite a different way. So, I have to rely on my patient to become my hands, or the patient's family, because there's no direct patient contact. I also have to be quite clear in some of the instructions I give to the patient in terms of doing their exercises and how to do them safely and when to stop. It's very important to give the patient very clear instructions about what are some of the signs of over exercising and when should we stop. So that's a checklist for the patient about managing adverse events.

Are there any eligibility criteria for your telehealth group exercise program?

Host site physiotherapist – Rita: I guess we run a group-based exercise program that's delivered into patients' home by telehealth and the patients that we chose are patients that would normally have difficulty coming to our exercise program at the hospital. So, in terms of looking at some of the eligibility criteria, you need to think about some of the patients that can exercise safely within their own home, that has a support person. And other considerations include patients that have some prior computer experience because they will be able to pick up a telehealth session a bit easier. Another consideration is maybe patients with ability to hear and see quite well through the telehealth sessions.

What are the benefits of providing this intervention via telehealth?

Host site physiotherapist – Rita: It's difficult in terms of parking at the hospital is quite expensive. It's also quite a hassle for the patient to get up in the morning and get changed, get ready to travel to the hospital with a long commute time. So, using a telehealth session can cut down on some of those access and transport difficulties. The beauty of a telehealth session is I can see the patient doing exercise in their own home. So not the hospital stairs, I can see them doing the exercises from their own steps. I can see them doing the exercises from their own chairs, so it's a lot more meaningful for the patient.

Why were you referred to the Princess Alexandra Hospital physiotherapy telehealth group exercise program?

Client - Glynn: I have had a long history of illness, particularly heart related problems which have resulted in chronic heart failure and that's required a lot of physiotherapy. Firstly, when I was an inpatient, I had visits from physios on a daily basis and it was there I met Rita, who invited me to participate in the new program of doing exercises at home. So, I quickly signed up for that and we spent the next twelve weeks in that program.

What equipment did you need for the telehealth group exercise program?

Client - Glynn: Yes, just prior to starting the home program, Rita explained that I needed a blood pressure kit and an oxygen saturation level gadget. We were familiar with most of that, because for many years we've had a blood pressure machine at home, and we just carried on using that. But I was grateful for the loan of the oxygen sat, little measuring device, I don't know what you call it. We did have a computer at home, and it was simply a matter of Rita giving us the website address. We just logged that on and away we went.

What are the benefits of this telehealth service?

Client - Glynn: Being able to exercise at home was tremendous. We didn't have to get up early and get dressed and go in. We were able to be far more relaxed. I didn't have to get out of my pyjamas...

Partner: But you did.

Client - Glynn: But I did. The saving in expense of carparking and petrol costs and all the other bits and pieces was tremendous.

Partner: For me, it saved me from making sure that Glynn was right and able to walk down the steps and everything. Then also, I used to stand in the doorway, just watching to make sure that he was okay, that he wouldn't fall over or anything. But no, it was just so much better being at home. Because at the moment, having to drive in every week, I just sit there and wait – even though I get a book read. No, I think it's great. I thoroughly, I wish that tele-physio would just keep on going. It was good.

Are there any improvements that could be made to this telehealth service?

Client - Glynn: There were a couple of little hiccups with a couple of the participants who weren't probably as au fait with computers as others and so they struggled a little bit. And maybe some more concentrated tuition for those people to get them up to speed because they can hold back the rest of the class while we're waiting for them to get their gear sorted out or catch up with the rest of us. But, no as a general program, it operates – did and is doing well.