

Risky business - Consumers need to be aware of risks of ad-hoc telehealth

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Consumers should be aware of the risks associated with using a one-off telehealth consultation to access a particular medicine, says Consumers Health Forum of Australia (CHF).

CHF's comments come after media reports of practitioners who specialize in prescribing certain medications have been caught making almost 12,000 prescriptions for a specialized medicine in a six-month period.

"It's really hard to see how that volume of prescriptions being made is in the best interests of consumers and how safe practice has been followed," said CHF CEO Dr Elizabeth Deveny.

CHF is concerned that this model is not Telehealth as it is supposed to be, but rather a quick fix, which implies that you'll get the medication you are after with little or no questioning.

"What we are seeing here is not really high quality healthcare, it's a high throughput business model. We also know that some of these consultations don't have a face-to-face requirement. Instead, some of them are run through a text-based service, which we suspect could be AI generated to assess a consumer's eligibility for a particular medication. This just isn't ok," said Dr Deveny.

CHF also recognises why this model would be appealing to consumers, particularly for those who have tried other avenues to access medication and been told no.

"Suddenly you see a practitioner willing to give you what you need, so of course you go there," said Dr Deveny.

Dr Deveny said it was important to that consumers who do access medication this way were not stigmatised or shamed for doing so. Instead, consumers should be supported to inform themselves of this model and understand what they should look out for and ask.

Some questions consumers may consider asking during their consultation with an ad-hoc telehealth practitioner include:

- What happens if I have an adverse reaction to the new medication?
- Who do I go to see about it?
- Can I get another appointment with the same prescriber, or do I have to see someone else?
- If you have a regular GP you see, will the ad-hoc telehealth provider share your session notes with your ongoing provider?

“Another thing we suggest consumers do is if they find themselves in a situation where their usual practitioner can't meet their healthcare needs, say to prescribe something for them, like opioids or medical cannabis, you can ask them if they know of another practitioner who can help you.”

Doing this is not uncommon and we wish that more consumers did it. While GPs are skilled generalist, some also have deep expertise in particular areas of healthcare. It's okay to ask your healthcare team to support you to get the care you need,” said Dr Deveny.

CHF recognises that not everyone has an ongoing relationship with a GP, particularly younger people. For people in this situation, it is recommended that firstly they consider finding a local GP and get on their books, but also to think about what other health information services are available to them, like Health Direct or online support or patient groups where they can ask other consumers for advice.

CHF would also like to see government agencies provide consumer friendly information and guidance to consumers who are considering using telehealth for an ad-hoc access purpose.

“Currently there really isn't much consumer-friendly stuff out there for consumers to help make an informed decision with. We can surely do better than the current status quo.”

What we want to see is consumers making an informed decision about

their healthcare, whatever they decide to do and that choice is respected and the care they receive is best practice and safe,” said Dr Deveny.

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