

Happenings

Reflections on a Canadian Online Telehealth Course: Going Forward With Telehealth Nursing

Antonia Arnaert, Norma Ponzoni

Telehealth is the provision of health care through the use of information and communication technology (ICT), a mode of delivery that is becoming mainstream in various acute and home care settings in Canada and abroad.

Telehealth is now gaining acceptance by patients and health-care providers, as it is seen as an effective and convenient alternative to face-to-face interactions. Its potential is closely tied to a booming and quickly evolving technology industry. Yet, ironically, the training and professional development necessary for the optimal use of telehealth are lagging behind, leaving nurses and allied health professionals ill equipped and unprepared for the rapid changes taking place. Many providers are being trained on the job, through trial and error, as telehealth is not yet a standard part of health-professional curricula. This has resulted in feelings of frustration and resistance (Bulik & Shokar, 2010). The situation is similar for nurses engaged in telepractice, despite the fact that telehealth nursing is one of the fastest-growing areas of nursing (Allen, Aylott, Loyola, Moric, & Saffarek, 2015).

In order to address this training issue, the Office of Continuing Education at the Université de Moncton took the initiative in 2012 to develop, with the support of Health Canada and the university's Consortium National de Formation en Santé, a French-language online telehealth course, offered free of charge and open to various health professionals.

The online course consists of seven modules that offer an overview of the history and functionality of telehealth in a variety of contexts using an eLearning platform. As well as the history of telehealth and an introduction to its services, the modules cover the use of various ICTs (including mobile health applications), organizational and professional aspects of telehealth service delivery, and the use of technology to facili-

tate health-care communication among practitioners. While there is no fixed timeline for completing the course, users must pass an online quiz at the end of each module before moving on to the next.

To date, 171 people have signed up for the course, 60 of whom have completed it and received a certificate. Of the registrants so far, roughly 30% have been nurses, 30% administrators, and 40% physicians, medical technicians, social workers, respiratory therapists, educators, and so on. As the course is offered in French, the majority of participants have been from the two Canadian provinces where francophones are prominent, New Brunswick and Quebec, while six have come from French Africa (Mali, Cameroon, Morocco, Algeria, and Madagascar) and four from Haiti and Great Britain. During its first two years (2012–13), 57 users contributed to an evaluation of the program by reflecting on their experiences with the course content, structure, and format and on their overall satisfaction with the course; however, since the evaluations were anonymous, no relationships can be extrapolated between the registrant and his/her progression in the course.

Despite the variable levels of use and familiarity with telehealth in their practice, the majority of respondents ranked the course as high in quality and indicated having learned much about many different aspects of telehealth, such as the domain-specific jargon, the use and functionality of various telehealth technologies, the range of current and future initiatives in Canada and abroad, the challenges inherent to the implementation of telehealth, and the scope of practice of telehealth nurses and technicians. This variability in terms of users' preparation for the course led to divided feedback on the depth of information covered. There was an obvious dichotomy, with some users finding the course pertinent and interesting and others complaining that the content was too intense and complex. This phenomenon is often seen in education when there is no screening mechanism as to the learner's level of knowledge on a particular topic. It can easily be avoided by tailoring the offering, thereby allowing learners to pick and choose the content that most interests them. Giving learners a choice motivates them to move forward without having to review content that they consider redundant or irrelevant to their practice.

The majority of learners were already using some form of telehealth in their practice, which had sparked an interest in learning about both its current and its future potential for improving care for patients and families. The integration of health-related examples demonstrated the relevance of the content for their day-to-day work. The acquisition of knowledge about this evolving trend in health-care delivery gave them confidence in their ability to trouble-shoot and to pursue the type of employment in which telehealth plays an important role. However,

despite being offered case-based examples, videos, and exercises, some users were dissatisfied with the content-driven approach. A common criticism of traditional, content-focused online courses is that they allow for only limited interactivity and engagement; the content often remains theoretical with little opportunity for application of knowledge or hands-on practice. One solution to the challenges inherent in online learning might be the introduction of interactive eLearning platforms that incorporate simulated, virtual environments where learners can apply their new knowledge immediately while simultaneously interacting with one another to create communities of practice.

Overall, users were satisfied with the course. They found that it met their learning needs and gave them access to information that generally is not readily available to nurses and health professionals interested in telehealth. However, an important message can be gleaned from several of their comments with regard to the presentation of online content. Since user-friendliness is an essential characteristic of any online course, developers must be clear and straightforward in their language and instructions, to ensure full comprehension and avoid misunderstandings; in addition, the layout and course structure must be logical and easy to use, as online learners have little patience with technical difficulties that may arise.

Despite the fact that this course consisted of a general overview of telehealth, participants from various professions responded enthusiastically and it can be considered a success. However, because of the rapid evolution of technology and the specific competencies required for the skilful delivery of telehealth care, the content needs to be tailored even further. In the next iteration of the course, the content will be profession-specific and more flexible, allowing users to pick and choose according to their knowledge, interests, and needs. The Université de Moncton will soon be offering an online telehealth nursing course to address the growing need for telenurses with specific competencies and skills. The provision of profession-specific telehealth content, in the context of interactive online virtual communities of practice, supports the paradigmatic shift towards learner-centred approaches to education and will eventually influence the quality of telehealth care offered to patients and families.

References

- Allen, M., Aylott, M., Loyola, M., Moric, M., & Saffarek, L. (2015). Nurses: Extending care through telehealth. *Studies in Health Technology and Informatics*, 208, 35–39. doi:10.3233/978-1-61499-488-6-35
- Bulik, R. J., & Shokar, G. S. (2010). Integrating telemedicine instruction into the curriculum: Expanding student perspectives of the scope of clinical practice. *Journal of Telemedicine and Telecare*, 16, 355–358. doi:10.1258/jtt.2010.090910

Acknowledgements

The online telehealth course was made possible through funding from Health Canada as part of the Roadmap for Canada's Linguistic Duality 2008–2013 and the support of the Consortium National de Formation en Santé (CNFS) of the Université de Moncton. The CNFS, founded in 2003, is a pan-Canadian group of 11 colleges and universities offering French-language education in various health-care disciplines alongside six regional partners.

Antonia Arnaert, MPH, MA, PhD, is Associate Professor, Ingram School of Nursing, McGill University, Montreal, Quebec, Canada, and a CJNR Editor. Norma Ponzoni, RN, MScN, MEd, is a PhD candidate and Faculty Lecturer, Ingram School of Nursing, McGill University.