

Primary HealthCare Telemedicine (as part of the PHC Telemedicine and Client Support Service) is the remote delivery of health services, including consultations and health assessments, over the telecommunications infrastructure. It allows healthcare providers to evaluate, diagnose, manage and treat patients without the necessity of a face-to-face visit at the time.

Primary HealthCare has been offering a 24hr service of telemedicine, via teleconsultations, from March 2020 - since the onset of Covid-19. To date, over 300,000 medical teleconsultations have been carried out. Each consultation is documented in our PHC electronic patient record (EPR) system, thus facilitating patient continuity of care and improving patient safety. Local audit studies have shown that around 75% of all patient complaints, presenting in the form of phone-calls or video-calls, were resolved through telemedicine consultations alone, while the other 25% necessitated a face-to-face review in one of the health centres or community clinics, or needed to be referred to A+E. The actual consultation can be in the form of a simple phone-call, or through a video-consultation. The client can also send photos of particular lesions such as rashes to the telemedicine doctor, and be provided with medical advice in real time. The doctors providing this service are general practitioners (family doctors) or general practitioner trainees. Requests for domiciliary visits by health centre doctors are vetted by the telemedicine doctors, and since the inception of this service, local audits have shown that the actual number of medical home visits carried out has decreased by up to 85%. This allows for increased availability of doctors for cases that actually necessitate and merit family doctors to be present on site, while still offering adequate medical guidance for other cases.

Telemedicine doctors can make use of Whatsapp or Microsoft Teams as a platform for videoconferencing, thus offering a safe visual aid to consultations, while ensuring better patient confidentiality. The call is still initiated through a phone-call (on 21231231/21222444) by the patient, who is passed on to the GP by a call agent. The doctor can then decide whether a video-consultation is particularly suitable for the specific case.

During their daily consultations, the doctors give specific and individualised medical advice (since they also have access to different e-sources related to the individual patient's health records), offer reassurance and guidance regarding patient symptomatology, and guide patients on how to access the various services available in the community. They can also book blood investigations and provide information about various investigation results when this is indicated. Health promotion information is also provided regularly, and patients are educated about their own medical conditions, thus encouraging individual empowerment. Mental health advice is provided regularly. Additionally, community institutions, such as care homes or homes for the elderly, often approach the PHC Telemedicine service for medical advice.

Telemedicine services are provided for the whole population, ranging from infants to the elderly. There is also a speech-language pathologist working from the Telemedicine Centre twice a week – screening for autism in young children via the Lenti programme is carried out, as well as dealing with any calls necessitating speech-language pathologist advice. Other health care professionals, such as

nurses, have offered their services from this centre, and were very active during the Covid-19 pandemic. Together with doctors, they have followed up thousands of Covid-positive patients in the community. In the future we also envisage the services of podiatrists and physiotherapists being offered from the Telemedicine Centre and are exploring the provision of remote monitoring services.

Contact telephone numbers are: 21231231 and 21222444 The service is provided Monday to Sunday, 24/7, free of charge, to all clients in Malta and Gozo.

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