Enhancing emergency mental health care with face-to-face video calls

To more accurately assess mental health emergency callers and facilitate face-to-face care, Ambulance Victoria is exploring the use of text message-initiated video calls, which would connect patients with a mental health specialist.

## Background

Many of the mental health patients who call Triple Zero (000) for assistance would receive more appropriate care from a specialist mental health clinician than from the paramedics that staff a typical ambulance.

However, for some patients, particularly those experiencing a crisis or who live in remote and rural areas without community-based mental health resources, calling Triple Zero (000) is their only option.

Currently, Victoria’s emergency call-takers are only able to triage patients through a voice call, which can deprive them of important visual cues that would help them fully assess the situation. This can lead to the patient being transported to an emergency department (ED) by ambulance, which can cause additional distress and delay face-to-face assessment by a specialist mental health clinician. Long ED wait times can negatively impact a patient’s wellbeing and, in some cases, they may leave before receiving care.

To enable face-to-face specialist care for mental health patients calling Triple Zero (000), Ambulance Victoria is piloting video telehealth technology in the Ambulance Victoria Referral Service (AVRS). AVRS receives low-acuity calls that are transferred from the main Victorian Triple Zero (000) service for secondary triage by experienced paramedics and nurses.

By giving patients an option to initiate a video call with a mental health nurse when contacting Triple Zero (000), Ambulance Victoria aims to improve access to more appropriate mental health care and enhance the patient experience. The project also aims to reduce unnecessary ambulance dispatches and hospitalisations.

**Telemental health pilot (Tele-HELP)**

**Lead** Ambulance Victoria

**Funding round** 2019–20

**Status** In progress

**Objectives**

* Reduce the number of emergency callers triaged by AVRS mental health nurses who are transported to hospital via ambulance
* Increase referrals to mental health services and the provision of self-care advice
* Improve the patient experience and satisfaction with care received
* Maintain or reduce the rate at which the ambulance service is contacted again within 24 hours for patients triaged through video

## Key activity

Video triage will be offered as an extension of the voice-only triage currently offered by AVRS, and the video technology will be integrated into the service’s existing triage software.

As per the service’s normal procedure, suitable patients will be transferred to a mental health nurse for triage. Upon accepting the call, the responding mental health nurse will offer the patient the video conferencing option if they have a video-capable mobile phone. Patients will be able to access the video triage service via an SMS text message.

Many AVRS mental health nurses are already using similar video technology to consult with mental health patients outside of their work with Ambulance Victoria and are experienced in providing ‘telemental’ healthcare to assess and treat patients.

The pilot will run for 15 months, operating seven days a week. 

## Status

This innovation project was accepted in the Better Care Victoria 2019–20 funding round and is currently underway.