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# Dial a doctor: Three pharmacies offer virtual service to help those without regular GP

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Westshore Pharmacy pharmacist Carmen Loke says Doctor2Go acts as a one-stop shop for customers

A Napier pharmacy offering an instore virtual doctor service to patients wants to quash the idea that good healthcare can only be achieved within the confines of four walls.

Westshore Pharmacy introduced telehealth service Doctor2Go in May; it's one of just three pharmacies in New Zealand trialling the technology.

The store's pharmacist Carmen Loke says Doctor2Go acts as a one-stop shop for customers, offering access to both quality care and convenience at the touch of a screen.

Doctor2Go allows pharmacy customers, who need to speak to a GP for a prescription or medical advice, to contact a general practice team via video call on a tablet.

The patient makes the call from within a consultation space inside the pharmacy and is subsequently screened by a registered nurse before being connected to a doctor. The consultation fee is \$59.

If prescription medication is needed, a prescription is faxed to the pharmacist, as per normal.

Doctor2Go co-founder Michael Haskell, who is also chief executive of Third Age Health, a provider of medical services to residential care facilities, says the service is best suited to pharmacies in rural areas without a general practice nearby, or those in metropolitan areas that see a lot of international visitors or business travellers.

The service isn't aimed at patients who already have a regular GP within the town or city of the hosting pharmacy, but rather walk-in patients who are just passing through.

"It suits someone who might be on a business trip but has left their medication at home, or someone needing a repeat prescription," Mr Haskell says.

Nestled near Napier's airport, Westshore Pharmacy sees local customers and often rural residents coming into town from as far afield as Wairoa in the north.

Doctor2Go also has a clinical psychologist and a counsellor on hand if it is determined pharmacy customers need these.

Some doctors practising in the same area as Westshore Pharmacy raised concerns with pharmacy staff over how Doctor2Go might affect clawbacks on general practice capitation payments.

But Ms Loke says they have nothing to fear as the service mostly targets patients who don't have access to subsidised healthcare and medicines.

The pharmacy doesn't get a cut of the consultation fee; however, Mr Haskell believes pharmacies will benefit from increased prescription volume and retail sales, gained by extra foot traffic.

It's too early to evaluate the financial value of offering the service, Ms Loke says. The focus is on embracing technology to widen access to healthcare over profit-making.

The virtual consult system has its limitations though. For example, Doctor2Go doesn't see children at this stage. If somebody presents in the consult with symptoms warranting a physical examination, they are directed to the nearest GP or after-hours clinic.

The Doctor2Go team decided to cross into the pharmacy sector following a successful rollout three years ago in corporate companies wanting to provide the service to employees.

Fewer than 50 consultations have been carried out across the three pharmacies trialling Doctor2Go; however, Mr Haskell is in negotiations with a handful of other pharmacies thinking about signing up.

Doctor2Go isn't the only service set to shake up the traditional pharmacy model – Auckland-based company Zoom Health also launched in May.

Zoom Health is a medicine delivery service app that uses a centralised dispensary in Auckland to post medicines directly to patients' doorsteps all over the country.

The Pharmacy Council's telehealth statement acknowledges that pharmacies are using technology more and more to "encourage active patient involvement in their healthcare".

Pam Duncan, manager of policy and standards at the Pharmacy Council, advises the Medical Council is best placed to comment on requirements for GP telehealth consultations, but says pharmacists offering the service need to uphold ethical and professional obligations. A high level of counselling, medication checking and patient safety needs to be considered no matter how the pharmacy service is delivered, Ms Duncan says.

## **FACT BOX**

- One Napier pharmacy and two Auckland pharmacies are trialling virtual health service Doctor2Go

- The service is aimed at walk-in patients who are business travellers, overseas visitors or people who don't have access to a regular GP

- Patients presenting with symptoms warranting a physical examination are directed to the nearest GP or after-hours clinic

