Access to Virtual Care and Assistive Technology for People with Disability: Improving Mental Health and Wellbeing

Alessandra Doolan[1,2]

1. Adjunct Senior Lecturer, Sydney Central Clinical School,
Faculty of Medicine and Health, The University of Sydney
2. The Health and Technology Advisory Group (HTAG)

Mental health is one of the leading cause of disability in Australia. The burden of mental health conditions is growing due to increasing prevalence in chronic conditions and ageing population. Mental illness is also most prevalent among those with lower socioeconomic status (SES), Indigenous communities and individuals with permanent disabilities. Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of Australians who reported mental health impact has increased compared to pre-pandemic period.

During the COVID pandemic, the NDIS extended their funding supports to include non face-to-face (virtual / online). Some functional improvements were observed in the individual disability participants who received non face-to-face supports. Despite limited physical interactions provided in virtual care settings – many disability participants and their families / carers expressed that the virtual care supports were helpful as they were still able to "stay connected" and receive some supports and assistance, including health and wellbeing telehealth and video consultations.

Some of the major equity and access challenges experienced by the disability community was further highlighted during the COVID period. Challenges included: limited health literacy, limited accessibility to digital and assistive technology, limited or lack of digital literacy, lack of funding for digital training including support for carers, and limited digital infrastructure systems available in the primary health care and community settings.

Key Outcomes: People with disabilities were provided continued support including training in digital tools, improving inclusiveness for people with disabilities, improving healthy literacy, addressed health disparities through innovative technologies and approaches, and improved accessibility to health care and supports (including health and NDIS COVID safety messages.