



Investigation focus: Telehealth prescribing of weight loss medication

Wider learnings and recommendations for service improvements

The investigation highlighted the potential risk of harm associated with the prescription of weight loss medication to patients in a virtual health care setting and the importance of thorough, patient-focused consultations, with clearly defined treatment pathways and eligibility criteria.

Clinicians providing telehealth assessment for the prescription and renewal of weight loss medication must ensure patient information is thoroughly assessed, verified and treatment flags, such as eating disorder behaviours, are thoroughly investigated prior to initiating treatment and when assessing patient progress for treatment continuation.

Telehealth services must have in place robust processes for patients deemed 'ineligible' for prescription weight loss medication due to disordered eating indicators and be provided clear alternative pathways and support services.

The rapid growth of virtual healthcare in Australia, together with increasing consumer reliance on telehealth services, highlights the clear need for development of national industry standards and an accreditation framework to establish consistent benchmarks to ensure the delivery of safe, high-quality patient care.

Background

The Office of the Health Ombudsman (OHO) initiated a systemic investigation into the prescription of weight loss medication by a telehealth service following the complaint of inappropriate prescribing practices resulting in adverse health outcomes for a consumer with a history of disordered eating.

The complaint involved a consumer falsely reporting body-metric data (height, weight and BMI) on pre-screening questionnaires to obtain prescription weight loss medication. Following the initial prescription, the consumer continued to provide false body measurements to different practitioners within the same telehealth service to obtain prescription renewals.

The consumer's weight dropped to a dangerously low BMI, raising concerns about the adequacy of the telehealth model in verifying clinical information reported by the consumer when determining eligibility for prescription weight loss medication, and the processes for identifying and supporting consumers with eating disorders and other vulnerabilities.

The Investigation

The investigation into the consumer's care focused on the processes established to determine weight loss medication eligibility and exclusion criteria, including:

- the policies and processes in place to ensure the prescription of weight loss medication complies with national prescribing guidelines.
- the systems in place to verify the accuracy of information provided by consumers and mitigate the risk of deliberate non-disclosure or misrepresentation by consumers to obtain weight-loss



medications outside safe prescribing parameters.

- the processes and system controls to screen and assess consumers for eating disorder risk when determining prescription eligibility.

Investigation issues

The systemic issues identified included:

- **Lack of visual verification** of pre-screening questionnaire responses and patient-reported body-metric data during telehealth consultations.
- **Inadequate screening** for eating disorders and other clinical contraindications.
- **Limited duration and depth of telehealth consultations**, impacting the quality of clinical assessments.
- **Reliance on the initial clinical assessment** by subsequent practitioners when continuing prescriptions, without performing a detailed clinical review or reassessment of body measurements and medication suitability.
- **Lack of clinical auditing** to evaluate clinical performance and address quality improvement gaps.
- **Limited practitioner training and guidance** for medication eligibility assessments, including eating disorder screening and the verification of real-time physique and clinical assessment data.

The telehealth service acknowledged the potential systemic issues and conducted an internal review, leading to corrective actions and broader program development recommendations.

Recommendations

The OHO acknowledges the internal review undertaken by the telehealth service and the

immediate implementation of corrective actions to address the systemic issues identified.

The OHO notes the following key recommendations were implemented:

- policies and procedures that clearly define medication eligibility and exclusion criteria and align with clinical guidelines and pharmacotherapy regulations.
- mandatory real-time image submission by consumers at the commencement and continuation of prescription weight loss medication, and expanded use of video conferencing technology tools.
- telehealth system tools to support clinical assessments comparable to in-person care, including mandatory data verification steps.
- prescribing system controls to ensure clinical protocols and eligibility criteria are met prior to the prescription of weight loss medication being enabled.
- mandatory education and training for all new and existing front-line clinical staff in the application of updated clinical protocols and system requirements for weight loss medication assessment and prescribing.
- a framework for the management of patients suspected of experiencing disordered eating behaviours seeking weight loss medication, with processes for referral and support services.
- clinical audit program to examine practitioner compliance with revised Weight Management Program policies, procedures and clinical protocols, in line with national guidelines for the prescription of weight loss medication.

The OHO notes all recommendations have been implemented and the systemic issues identified in the internal review have been addressed through ongoing quality improvement processes and clinical auditing.