

...healthy and sustainable rural, regional and remote communities.

Telehealth expansion welcomed but more needs to be done

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The National Rural Health Alliance, the peak body for rural and remote health in Australia, has welcomed the Australian Government's expansion of telehealth Medicare item numbers but has called for access to be expanded as soon as possible to all health professionals.

"Allowing more people to have consultations with their GP or health professional at home, whether for COVID-19 or something else, is a sensible move that will save lives," said CEO Dr Gabrielle O'Kane.

"But we need to see the Australian Government move as soon as possible to 'stage 4', which will allow any patient to see any health professional, including allied health professional, for any reason during the COVID-19 pandemic.

"This is particularly important for people in rural Australia where access to health care is more difficult and there are often fewer health professionals, so it's particularly important that these health professionals can see patients without the risk of getting sick.

Dr O'Kane warned that if telehealth was going to become more widespread, it's essential to improve internet connectivity in rural Australia.

"Rural Australia often has poor connectivity at the best of times,"

"With the rapid expansion of telehealth brought on by COVID-19, NBN Co and the Government must ensure that people in all parts of Australia can access these services.

"This should include not only improving connectivity and internet infrastructure in rural Australia, but also working with retail service providers to ensure that internet and data packages are affordable and accessible for everyone."

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The National Rural Health Alliance is Australia's peak non-government organisation for rural and remote health.