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**Developing teleaudiology guidelines for Australia**

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Teleaudiology usage over the past two years has surged as consumers and providers across the globe sought ways to safely access and deliver hearing healthcare. Ongoing well-being concerns, increasingly favourable perceptions towards teleaudiology and government financial support all contribute to the continued growth of teleaudiology.

While both users of hearing services (clients) and hearing health practitioners are interested in teleaudiology, skills, training, and resources need to be addressed[[1]](#footnote-1).

Audiology Australia is developing teleaudiology guidelines to help empower hearing health practitioners to use teleaudiology as a hearing service delivery option. Design of the guidelines, supported by links to training and clinical resources, is overseen by a [Working Group](https://teleaudiologyguidelines.org.au/about-the-guidelines-project/) representing consumer, practitioner, provider and research perspectives.

**The evidence for teleaudiology as a service delivery option[[2]](#footnote-2)**

Practitioners significantly increased their use of teleaudiology during the early stages of COVID (from 41.3% before COVID to 61.9% by August 2020), with practitioners predicting their use of telehealth to increase to 80.4%, specifically in relation to remote delivery of training and support.

Client-practitioner relationships have not suffered. One large national hearing provider observed a 40-fold increase in the number of clients taking up their remote hearing aid assistance in April to May 2020. The remote assistance tool used included functions for both remote hearing aid adjustments and an instant messaging function facilitating communication between hearing service staff and clients. Messages sent and received using this instant messaging function were conversational in tone, with clients checking in on how their audiologist was doing, making jokes, and freely using slang and emojis. These findings suggest that remote assistance tools do not negatively impact on the client-practitioner relationship, but rather provide an effective way for clients to access hearing healthcare in a way that strengthens the therapeutic relationship that they have built with their audiologist.

The positive outcomes of teleaudiology appear consistent across Australia. The Australian Government, in partnership with Audiology Australia, the Australian College of Audiology and Soundfair, funded research to understand the use of teleaudiology. One of the key findings shows that teleaudiology services were generally viewed as successful, and result in improved client outcomes[[3]](#footnote-3).

**Developing teleaudiology guidelines**

Funded by the Australian Government, the teleaudiology guidelines project responds to recommendations of the Hearing Health Roadmap (2019) and Parliamentary inquiries which suggested teleaudiology could improve access to hearing health services, regardless of location.

Audiology Australia consulted the hearing health sector about its initial draft guidelines in mid 2021.

Key findings from consultation feedback highlighted the:
• value of framing a pro-active role for the practitioner with a strong emphasis on client-centred care and the exercise of professional judgment
• importance of acknowledging teleaudiology as a service delivery option for providers, practitioners, and clients
• benefit of keeping guidelines broad to allow room for service and technology innovation
• need to complement, not duplicate, guidance available elsewhere
• value of providing resources to support and facilitate implementation.

**Informing the guidelines**

We know some practitioners are already delivering teleaudiology services and so will use the guidelines as a way to check their current service delivery processes. Others want more information on how to get started and how to set up a teleaudiology clinic. To address the needs of both groups, we have streamlined the guidelines to enable fast and efficient searching of information and a resource kit with links to external resources. This will assist practitioners and providers with little teleaudiology experience to set up teleaudiology services and/or develop the skills required to safely and effectively deliver teleaudiology services.

In other words, the guidelines will provide the WHAT and the resource kit will support the HOW.

We learned from our consultation that clients want information about teleaudiology and reassurance about the safety and quality of services provided remotely. Exercising choice is important for clients. To help address these needs, we are developing a consumer teleaudiology resource.

**The testing phase builds on the consultation phase and is critical to successful implementation**

While we have a diverse group of teleaudiology experts developing the guidelines, it is important to partner with practitioners in testing of the guidelines. The testing process explores the useability and clarity of the revised draft guidelines and informs resources to support the implementation process from mid 2022.

**The Future**

Many people across Australia seek no support for their hearing difficulties due to limited access. Teleaudiology offers a viable option for improving access to and earlier intervention in hearing loss and hearing disorders.

Whether you use teleaudiology or not, we want practitioners to get involved in testing the draft guidelines. Read the current [draft guidelines](https://teleaudiologyguidelines.org.au/draft-guidelines/) and find out how to get involved in testing and help prepare audiology for the future. <https://teleaudiologyguidelines.org.au/about-the-guidelines-project/>

*This opinion piece was first published on Audiology Australia LinkedIn page (Audiology Australia). It can also be shared direct from* [*www.teleaudiologyguidelines.org.au*](http://www.teleaudiologyguidelines.org.au) *via the share functions on the page.*

1. *Audiology Now 86, The 2020 National Teleaudiology Survey, ‘Utilisation, experiences and perceptions of teleaudiology services during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic’, (April to October 2020): an Australian perspective, Dr Bec Bennett, Ear Sciences Institute Australia, Elissa Campbell, Audiology Australia.* [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Accord (October 2021), ‘The future of teleaudiology seems assured’, Dr Bec Bennett, Ear Science Institute Australia, Perth WA* [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *In publication* [↑](#footnote-ref-3)