



**The Impact
of COVID-19 on
General Practice
in Australia**

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Intro

In my role as Chief Medical Officer at MedicalDirector, I've witnessed the far-reaching impact that COVID-19 pandemic has had on general practice.

Since the first emergence of the virus back in March 2020, general practices around Australia were asked to adopt a completely new way of delivering healthcare, seemingly overnight.

Since then we've adapted our practices to be flexible enough to deal with the (almost daily) changing situation, yet strong enough to protect our patients and healthcare providers against the threat of the virus. The toll that the COVID-19 pandemic has taken on general practices simply cannot be under-estimated. And this impact has been felt at every level of general practice.



We've all faced our individual challenges, from reception staff and practice managers who've adapted their practices to ensure safe treatment of patients, to the practice owners, many of whom have taken significant financial hits. And all the GPs who've adopted new technologies, adapted to new industry requirements and delivered new models of care for patients.

All the while dealing with an underlying stress of somebody walking into our practice with COVID-19. If this pandemic has proven anything, it's that our GPs are made of tough stuff. We're resilient, adaptable and willing to step up to the plate and do what's needed to continue delivering healthcare to our patients.

We've been asked to adapt in many ways, and I think it's important to acknowledge these.

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If this pandemic has proven anything, it's that our GPs are made of tough stuff.

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Telehealth has forced us to adopt new technologies, we've had to train in using new platforms and adapt to delivering healthcare virtually.

The introduction of new MBS item numbers, opioid and ECG changes, and mandatory bulk billing arrangements has had a significant impact on billing methods and practice procedures. And there have been a multitude of small, yet significant, changes we've made in our practices to ensure our patients are safe - chair placement, recorded phone messages, prescription delivery methods, adoption of protective gear, changes to websites, adoption of online booking systems, new triage procedures, and increased cleaning. The list has been endless.

Our GPs and general practice staff deserve a pat on the back for their agility and flexibility in extremely trying times. They should be commended for their ability to adapt so quickly to a completely new way of delivering health care.

For many of us, we were running on adrenaline during the initial months of this pandemic. Simply doing what needs to be done. As it becomes apparent that COVID-19 is here for a while, many of us are now contemplating what the future of general practice looks like.

But to look forward, we must first look back. The aim of this report is to examine the clinical impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on general practices around Australia. We've taken a data-led approach and analysed statistics from a range of sources. We've also offered some commentary around these numbers to contextualise the data in the hope that we can learn from our experience and move our practices forward to adapt to the new normal.

Dr. Charlotte Middleton

GP and Chief Medical Officer, MedicalDirector

January 2020
First Australian
COVID-19 case reported

April 2020
COVIDSafe app released
for contact tracing

May 2020
Australian government begins
gradually easing lockdown
restrictions across Australia

August 2020
State of disaster is declared
for VIC by Premier Andrews

November 2020
Re-imposition of restrictions and
lockdown in SA following a small
outbreak, which is quickly controlled
and restrictions lifted just five days later

2021
Small outbreaks of COVID-19 continue
across Australia, a vaccine is announced
and the country is hopeful for local
eradication of the virus

March 2020

- WHO officially declares COVID-19 a pandemic

- Lockdown restrictions progressively implemented by Australian government

- Safety net package to expand mental health, telehealth services, increased family violence prevention services and more

June 2020

Restrictions are reinstated in VIC in an apparent 'second wave' of infection

October 2020

Restrictions are significantly eased in VIC, with the state recording zero new cases and deaths for the first time since June

December 2020

- The Northern Beaches local government area of Sydney is declared a COVID hotspot, resulting in new restrictions and border controls

- Restrictions and border closures are reimposed in VIC, NSW and WA following an influx of new COVID-19 cases



Key Insights and Trends

Since the first case of COVID-19 was reported in Australia in March 2020, we've seen a significant impact on the way healthcare has been delivered throughout general practice. While the volume of visits has remained largely unchanged, what has changed is the way these services are delivered. This report seeks to highlight the most significant changes we've seen and provide some commentary on the reasons for the changes.

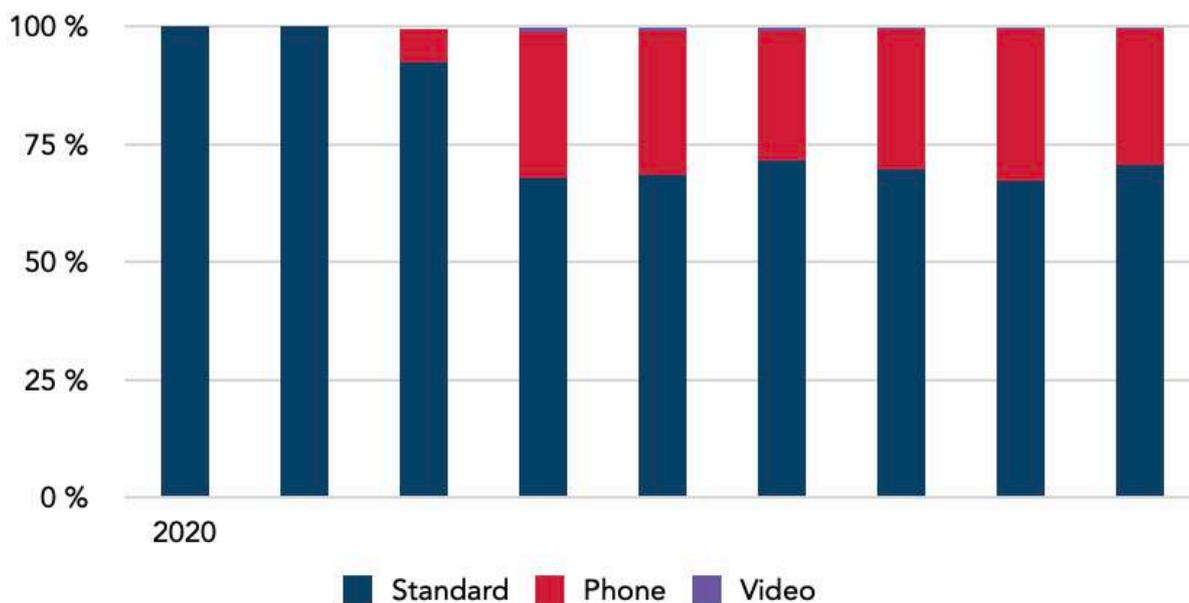


About the data

All data is presented from April 2020 to September 2020, with year-on-year data taken from the same period in 2019. It is derived from various sources, including Medicare, and reflects the trends of general practice in Australia, at an industry level.

Telehealth accounted for roughly 30% of consultations

Proportion of GP Services by method - nationally



Unsurprisingly, there's been a steep increase in telehealth consultations since the last week in March 2020. Telephone consultations accounted for roughly a third of consultations from April to September. The temporary MBS telehealth items that were made available to help reduce the risk of community transmission of COVID-19 certainly encouraged GPs to deliver healthcare this way.

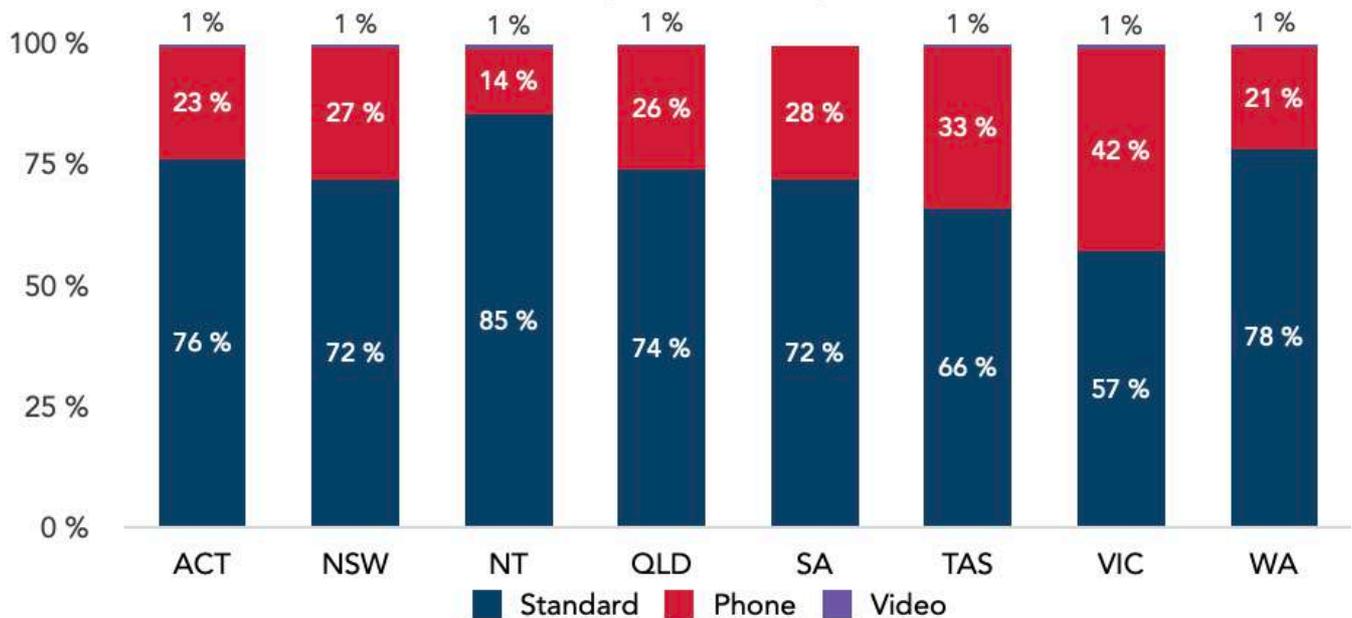
We know from our previous research that GPs have been more inclined to use familiar technology to meet their telehealth needs.

These numbers back up those findings, suggesting GPs were more comfortable using telephone rather than video (which accounted for less than 1% of consultations over the same period).

Interestingly, users of cloud clinical software, MedicalDirector Helix, had higher than average usage of video telehealth during this period, with secure video consultations made available within their clinical software.

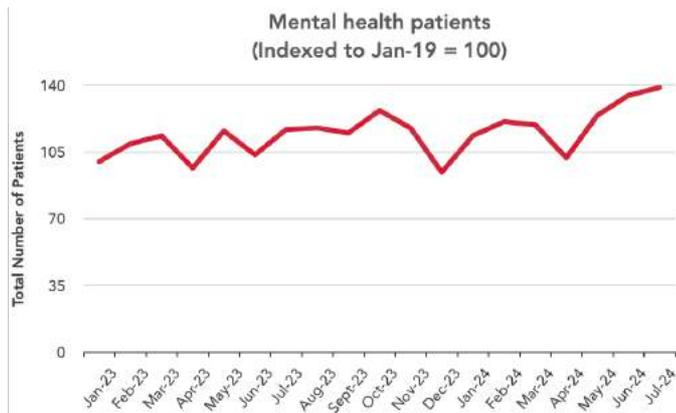
Tasmania and Victoria led the charge for telehealth

Proportion of GP Services by method by state (Apr-20 to Sep-20)

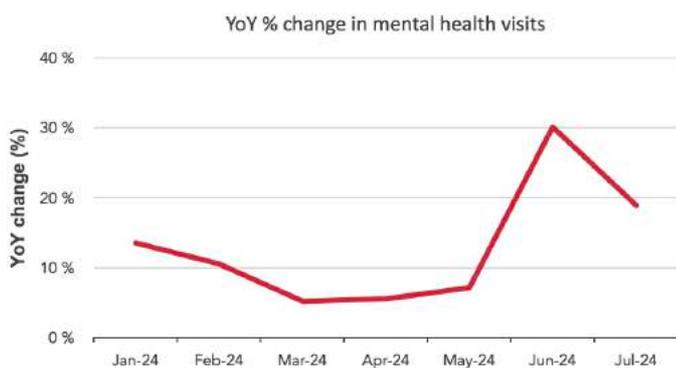


We saw the highest proportion of telephone and video consultations done in Victoria (41.71%) and Tasmania (33.40%). Victoria had the highest volume of video consults (1.25%) and although the Northern Territory had the least amount of telephone consultations (13.64%), they had slightly higher volumes of video consults than other states (1.12%).

COVID-19 has taken a significant toll on our mental health



It's clear that mental health issues have significantly risen during COVID-19 and this data confirms what we're hearing anecdotally from GPs around Australia. In particular, the number of mental health visits spiked in June and July 2020, with a 30% and 19% increase respectively compared to the same period in 2019.

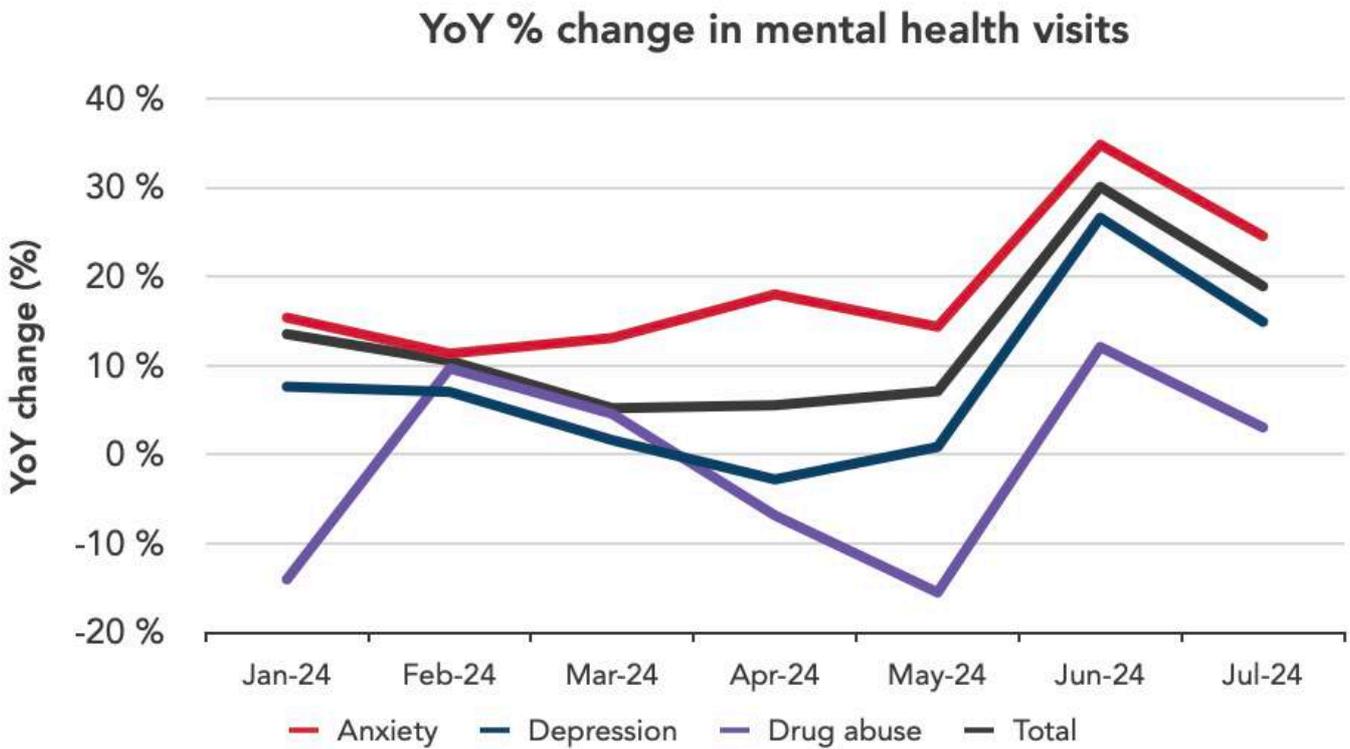


Although the increase is clear, this data only shows those who presented to a GP. There is an underlying question of the true size of the increase in mental health issues amongst Australians more broadly during this time as COVID-19 continues to take a toll on our mental health.

The state of mental healthcare in Australia

Watch now 

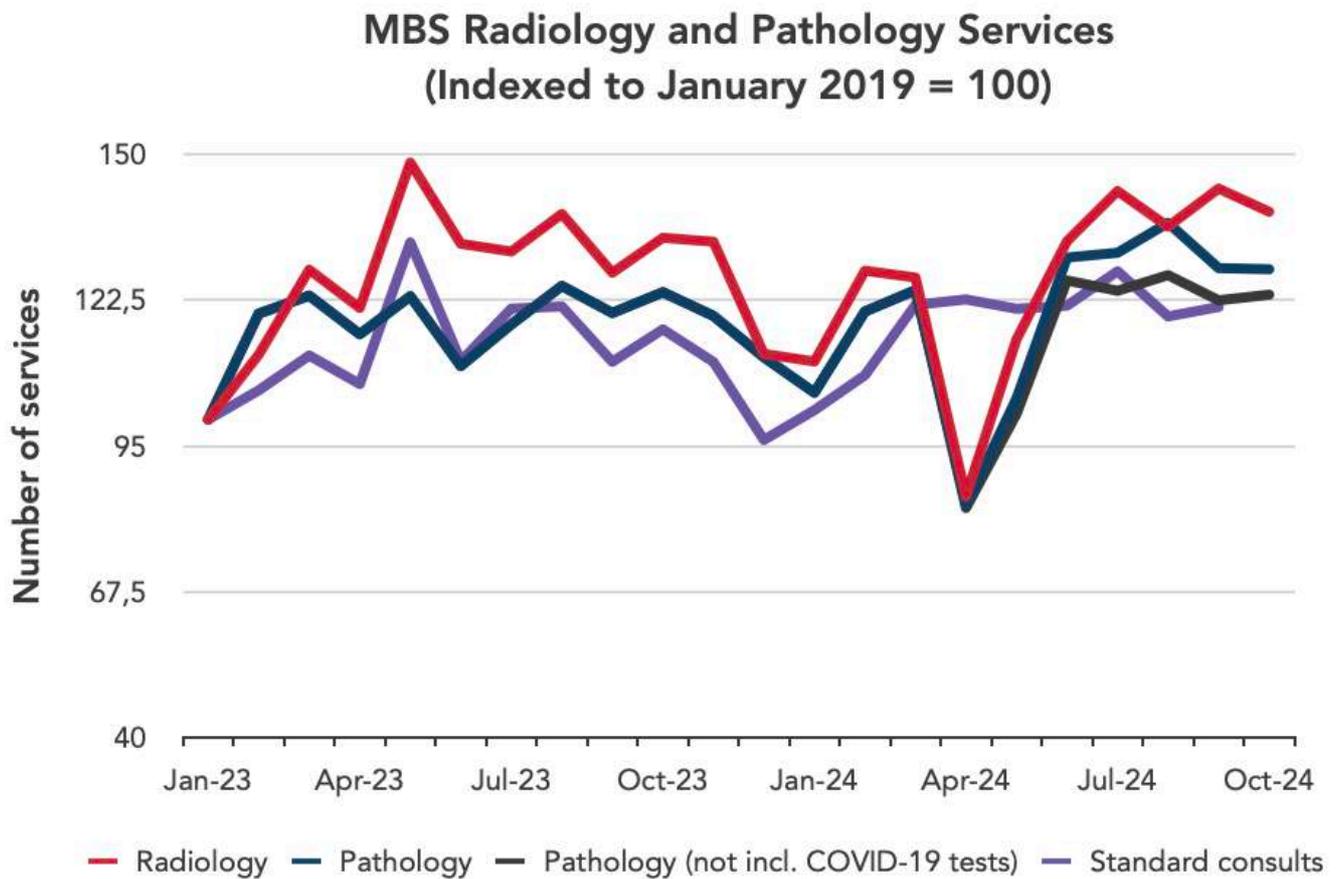
Anxiety has risen most year-on-year



The increase in mental health consults has been consistent across different types of mental health issues including anxiety, depression, and drug and alcohol dependence.

However anxiety showed the greatest increase with a 22% year-on-year increase in April-June 2020.

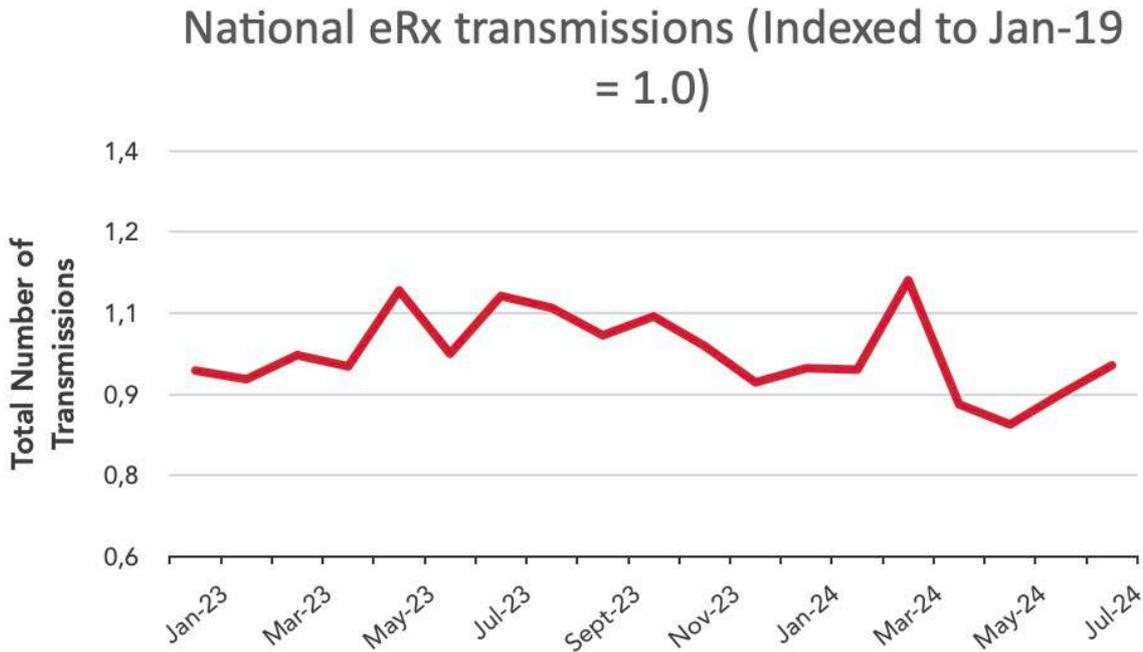
Pathology and radiology requests dropped by 30% in April 2020



There was a significant drop in both pathology and radiology requests in April 2020, with the lowest point being ~15% lower than January 2019 and a ~40% drop from March to April 2020. This may have been reflective of the initial uncertainty around COVID-19.

This number picked up in May 2020 as Australia started to better understand the pandemic and its associated risks.

Prescription requests spiked in March, followed by a steep decline



There was a significant surge in prescriptions in March 2020, with a ~15% increase compared to March 2019.

This trend has been largely patient-driven and is reflective of the medicines shortages Australia experienced in April. Uncertainty about future medication supply caused people to stockpile their medications.

We then saw a natural drop-off over the next three to four months as panic subsided and patients worked through their supply of medications. This has been trending back towards normal, but is still lower than 2019.

There have also been reports of potential medication misuse. One high-profile example is hydroxychloroquine, a drug used to treat malaria and certain autoimmune diseases, also believed to be a potential treatment for COVID-19.

However, the possible health risks of off-label use and the risk of shortages led the TGA to restrict initiation of hydroxychloroquine to certain indications and medical specialties.

How MedicalDirector helped encourage appropriate prescribing for hydroxychloroquine

Watch now

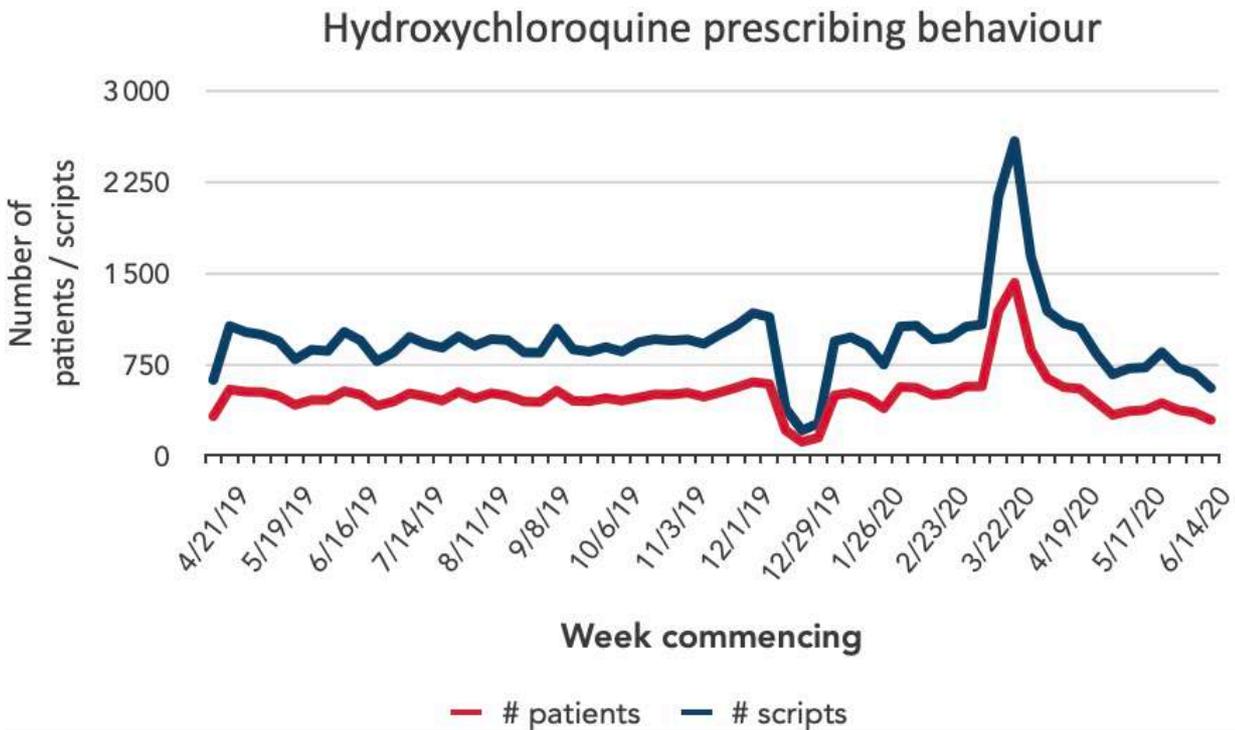


ePrescribing had a strong industry take-up

The introduction of new electronic prescribing functionality was well received by the industry, with a strong take-up across all states.

For sites that have enabled paperless prescribing, one in every five prescriptions on average is now written as a paperless script.

Attendance for referred specialist consultations dropped following restrictions



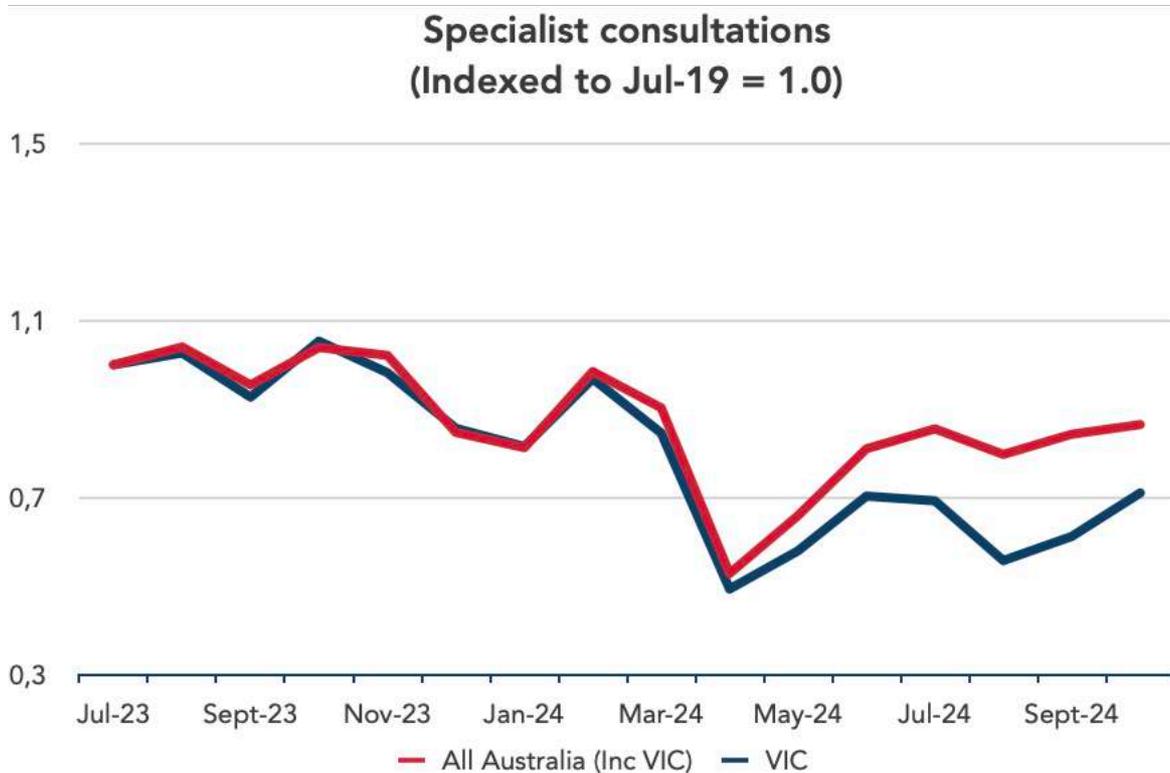
In March 2020, the Australian government suspended all non-urgent elective surgery to ensure we had enough hospital capacity to respond to COVID-19, as well as making sure they had enough stock of personnel protective equipment (PPE) for hospital staff.

This resulted in fewer referrals than usual with a significant dip in April 2020, soon after the announcement.

As restrictions eased we saw referrals increase, with the exception of VIC who had another surgery ban as a result of the state lockdown from June to October 2020.

As expected, there were fewer specialist consultations in 2020 than previous years, with the national average ~17% lower in Oct 2020 compared to the previous year, and VIC levels down ~33% for the same period.

Chronic disease management delayed during lockdowns



Chronic disease management items in March 2020 were ~10%-14% lower than in March 2019.

This is typical behaviour during a pandemic as people are more reluctant to leave home for non-emergency situations. Health management is not always seen as 'critical' by patients with chronic conditions, and as a result many postponed in-person visits for routine check-ups.

There was a natural catch up in the following months as people felt more at ease visiting their GP again. We saw 16-24% increase in chronic disease management items during June 2020 compared to the same period the previous year.

Looking to 2021 and Beyond

The numbers in this report clearly show the acute and far-reaching impact that COVID-19 has had on the delivery of healthcare in Australia. Never before have we seen such wide-scale impacts on GP operations, safety precautions and adoption of new technologies as we have in 2020.

The changes we've seen implemented are a true testament to the resilience of everyone involved in general practice and their continued commitment to deliver outstanding quality of care for their patients.

2021 is certainly looking more positive with more control over community transmission and a vaccine on the horizon. However, it's clear this pandemic is far from over.

We now need to consider how we move our practices forward in a way that is financially, mentally and physically sustainable for everyone involved. It's time to take back control as we settle in to our 'new normal'.

We need to fully embrace the technologies that have helped us thrive during this time such as telehealth, ePrescribing and cloud healthcare technologies, to make some lasting changes to the way we deliver healthcare.

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MedicalDirector Care is one example of an industry adaptation that better support practices in their pursuit of optimal patient care.

It's our hope that this pandemic shines a light on the pivotal role that general practice plays in shaping our healthcare system. That their resilience, tenacity and ability to adapt in the toughest of circumstances is not only acknowledged but celebrated.

And that any industry-wide reforms are made with input and thoughtful consultation from this important group of people.

Intuitive software solutions to deliver healthcare through COVID-19 and beyond



During this challenging time, maintaining a high level of care for your valued patients requires adaptability and resilience. At MedicalDirector, we believe technology can enable better patient care. By equipping your people and practice with intuitive software solutions in the cloud, together we can enhance clinical decision-making, patient experience and health outcomes.

Allowing you to continue delivering important moments of care in even the most unpredictable of circumstances.



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