

Supporting people living with dementia and care partners throughout the COVID-19 pandemic: Health service directions from the first wave in Calgary, Alberta

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Abstract

Background: The emergence of COVID-19 (SARS-CoV-2) as a novel coronavirus in late 2019 necessitated public health measures that have impacted the provision of care for people living with dementia and their families. The rapid shift to virtual care across health and social care sectors meant that providers did not have the opportunity to benefit from an evidence-based understanding about how and which services can safely and effectively be delivered virtually prior to public health measures being implemented. Additionally, isolation resulting from social distancing may be harming well-being for families as formal and informal supports become less accessible.

Method: To understand lived experiences and necessary changes in models of care delivery for people living with dementia during the COVID-19 pandemic in Canada, we remotely interviewed 20 dyads of people living with dementia and their care partners who normally attend a dementia specialty clinic in Calgary, Alberta, during a period where essential businesses were closed and health care had abruptly transitioned to telemedicine. Participants were 50% female and a majority of clinic patients in the dyad had a diagnosis of Alzheimer's Disease (75%). A reflexive thematic analysis was used to analyze the interview and field note data.

Result: Themes regarding virtual service provision emerged through the iterative qualitative data analysis: (1) continuation of community-based services for care partners and families delivered in innovative ways to meet support needs during the pandemic; (2) guidance in adapting to technology to enable accessible and effective treatment in a virtual care environment; (3) adapting the process and structure of virtual appointments to operationalize critical information provision while maintaining dignity for the person living with dementia.

Conclusion: The rapid move to virtual healthcare has influenced how and when people access health services. Health system innovation in the way we structure service mod-

els and care provision can mitigate barriers to maintaining high quality virtual health care for people living with dementia. In-depth understandings of how health systems can provide high-quality care in new virtual settings is key to maintaining quality of life for community-dwelling people living with dementia and care partners in times of public health emergencies.