

Alberta's pharmacy practice model is globally recognized for its innovative approach to healthcare delivery. Through the advocacy of the Alberta Pharmacists' Association (RxA), pharmacists now have expanded scope including prescribing authority, laboratory test ordering, and electronic health record access. While these advancements have transformed pharmacy practice, my experience reveals opportunities to further integrate pharmacists into Alberta's healthcare system through virtual care models for minor ailments.

Enhancing Access Through Virtual Minor Ailment Services

In my daily practice, I regularly encounter patients experiencing significant discomfort from conditions requiring timely intervention. For instance, patients with urinary tract infections often endure extended pharmacy wait times, 15-30 minutes for initial pharmacist consultation followed by an additional 30 minutes for prescription processing, while experiencing urgent symptoms. Similarly, parents with children suffering from bacterial conjunctivitis face the challenge of managing distressed children in pharmacy settings, particularly concerning during flu season when exposure risks are elevated.

My vision centers on implementing secure virtual consultation services for select minor ailments, allowing pharmacists to assess and treat conditions remotely. This approach would particularly benefit conditions like UTIs, bacterial conjunctivitis, and contraceptive needs, all scenarios where assessment primarily involves patient history and targeted questioning rather than physical examination.

For established patients with profiles in our system, we could conduct video consultations, assess their condition, prescribe appropriate medications, and arrange delivery, eliminating unnecessary waits and reducing infection exposure risks, especially during peak illness seasons. This model maintains confidentiality while creating efficiencies for both patients and pharmacy teams.

Integration with Primary Care Through Streamlined Referral Pathways

The virtual minor ailment service would strengthen pharmacist integration with primary care by establishing clear referral pathways when conditions exceed pharmacist scope or require physician attention. Rather than patients experiencing delays trying to access multiple providers, pharmacists could conduct initial assessments remotely and directly coordinate physician care when needed.

This approach aligns with the Modernizing Alberta's Primary Health Care System initiative's goal of designing healthcare around community needs rather than maintaining siloed services. By serving as accessible first-line providers for appropriate conditions, pharmacists could help address physician shortages while ensuring patients receive timely care within a connected system.

Continuing Care Applications

Virtual minor ailment services could significantly benefit continuing care residents. Many seniors in care facilities experience mobility challenges that make pharmacy visits difficult. Remote pharmacist consultations would allow assessment and treatment of minor conditions without unnecessary transportation, reducing stress for this vulnerable population.

Care facility staff could facilitate these virtual connections, enabling pharmacists to maintain relationships with residents while addressing health concerns promptly. This model would complement existing consultant pharmacist roles in continuing care by providing responsive intervention for acute minor conditions.

Mental Health Applications

For mental health services, virtual consultations could provide a comfortable environment for patients discussing sensitive medication issues. Many patients with mental health conditions experience anxiety in clinical settings, and the option to connect from home could improve engagement with pharmacist support services.

Remote check-ins for medication adherence, side effect management, and therapeutic response would enhance continuity of care while respecting patient preferences for how they receive healthcare services.

My Contribution as a Practicing Pharmacist

As a practicing pharmacist committed to advancing this integration vision, I will:

1. Advocate for regulatory frameworks supporting secure virtual minor ailment consultations, working with RxA to develop practice standards ensuring patient safety and clinical appropriateness.
2. Develop protocols for determining which conditions are suitable for virtual assessment versus those requiring in-person evaluation, creating clear clinical pathways that maintain quality care.
3. Implement a pilot virtual consultation service in my practice, documenting outcomes, patient satisfaction, and system efficiencies to build evidence supporting broader implementation.
4. Collaborate with local primary care networks to establish referral protocols ensuring seamless transitions when patients require physician care, strengthening interprofessional relationships.

Conclusion

Alberta stands at the forefront of pharmacy practice innovation, but opportunities remain to enhance service delivery through technology-enabled care models. By implementing virtual

minor ailment services, we can address access challenges, reduce unnecessary exposure risks, and create more patient-centered care experiences.

Building on RxA's advocacy work and Alberta's progressive pharmacy regulations, this vision represents a practical next step in pharmacy integration, one that addresses real challenges I observe daily in practice. As a practicing pharmacist, I am committed to advancing this model through advocacy, protocol development, pilot implementation, and knowledge sharing, helping create a more accessible and responsive healthcare system for all Albertans.