

The Extent of Digital Communication With Patients in NL During COVID-19 Pandemic

Objective

To compare billings by fee-for-service doctors for digital calls during COVID-19 to total billings in 2019.

Practice Points

1. During COVID-19, which started on 14 Mar 2020, a new fee code was established to facilitate communication with patients virtually. This occurred either by telephone or using telemedicine.

Data

Aggregate weekly billings for telemedicine, virtual meetings and total billings were obtained from the NL Centre for Health Information (NLCHI) from 6 Jan 2020 – 31 Dec 2020 for both family physicians and specialists. Total billings were obtained for 2019. Data are provided as average weekly volumes over four-week blocks. At time of print, total billings for 2020 were not available.

Results

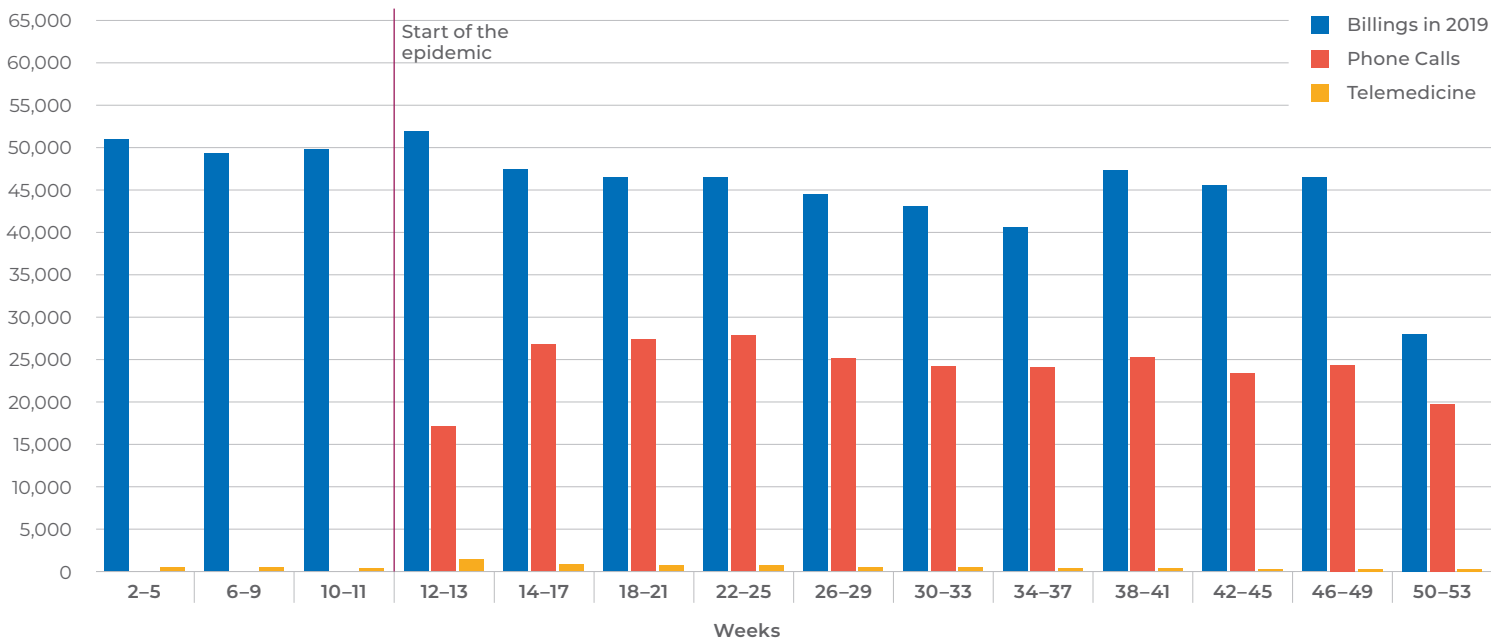


Figure 1. The Average Weekly Total Number of Billings by Family Physicians for 2019 and Billings for Telemedicine Plus Phone Calls in 2020

- The total number of billings for phone calls and telemedicine by family physicians during COVID-19 from week 11 of 2020 to Christmas week 2020 was 1,027,682 (16 Mar to 27 Dec 2020). In the comparable period of 2019, the total number of billings was 1,841,301 (17 Mar to 28 Dec 2019). Compared to 2019 billings during COVID-19, phone calls and telemedicine comprised 56% of billings.
- The average weekly billings for telemedicine in the ten weeks before COVID-19 was 274. During the first 46 weeks of COVID-19, the average weekly billings for telemedicine was 378 and for telephone meetings was 24,047.
- The increase in average weekly telemedicine calls during COVID-19 was 38%. However, the ratio of phone calls to telemedicine during COVID-19 was 64:1.

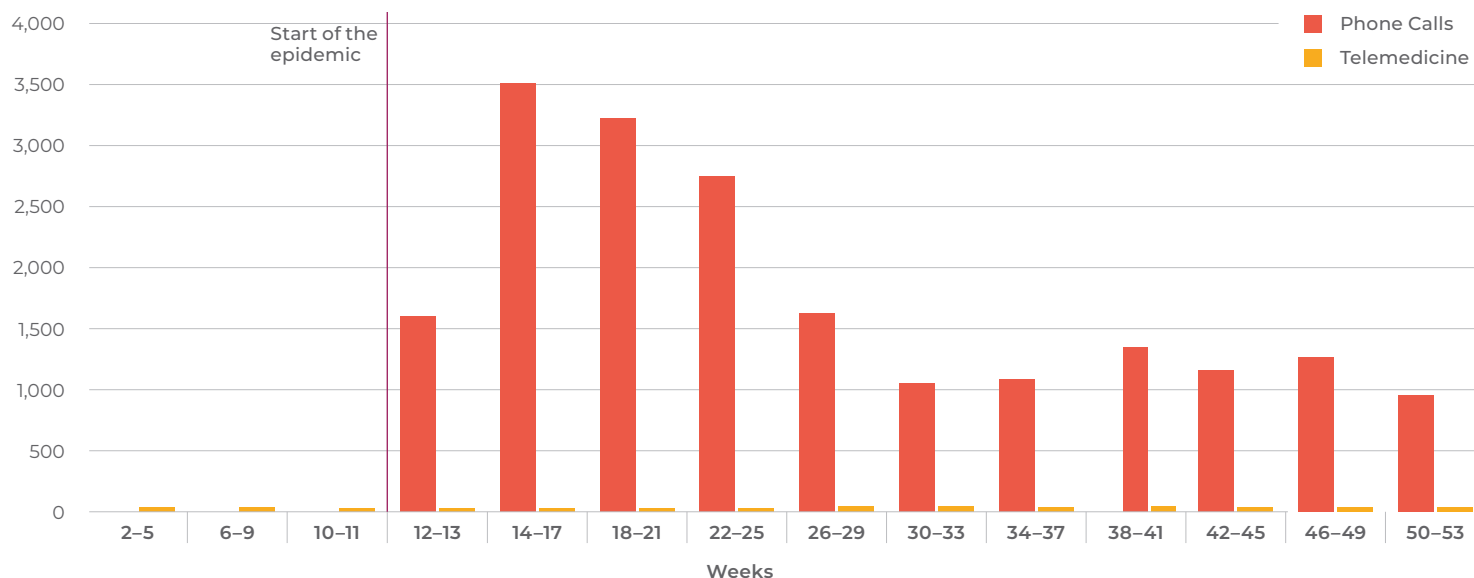


Figure 2. Average Total Number of Billings by Specialists per Week for Telemedicine and for Phone Calls in 2020

- The total number of billings by specialists during COVID-19 from week 11 of 2020 to Christmas week 2020 was 75,364 comprising 6.8% of total virtual care billings.
- The average weekly billings for telemedicine in the ten weeks before COVID-19 was 22. During the first 46 weeks of COVID-19, the average weekly billings for telemedicine was 26 and for telephone meetings 1,758.
- Few telemedicine calls were made before or during COVID-19. The ratio of phone calls to telemedicine was 64:1.

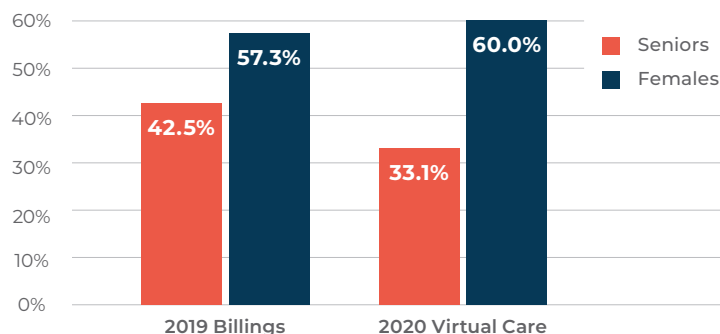


Figure 3. Per Cent of Billings for Women and Seniors in 2019 and for Virtual Communication in 2020 During COVID-19

- The proportion of seniors using virtual care (33%) during COVID-19 was lower than the proportion of total billings in 2019 (43%).

Conclusions

1. There was a massive increase in virtual communication between patients and fee-for-service doctors during COVID-19. The volume of calls were predominantly made by family physicians.
2. Compared to billing in 2019, during COVID-19 56% of calls were virtual.
3. Selection of seniors for virtual calls was less than anticipated, based on proportion of seniors in 2019 billings.