



May 21, 2021

Ms. Nancy Lum-Wilson
CEO and Registrar
Ontario College of Pharmacists
483 Huron Street
Toronto, ON M5R 2R4

Via Email: consultations@ocpinfo.com

Dear Ms. Lum-Wilson:

Re: Seeking Feedback on the Draft Virtual Care Policy

The Ontario Pharmacists Association ('OPA', the 'Association') is pleased to provide its comments and recommendations to the Ontario College of Pharmacists ('OCP', the 'College') on the College's new draft Virtual Care Policy. If approved, the policy would outline the College's expectations for the provision of care by pharmacy professionals to patients using virtual approaches outside of common and accepted practice models that use telephone-based communication.

OPA is committed to evolving the pharmacy profession and advocating for excellence in practice and patient care. With more than 10,000 members, OPA is Canada's largest advocacy organization and continuing professional development provider for pharmacy professionals across Ontario. By leveraging the unique expertise of pharmacy professionals, enabling them to practice to their fullest potential, and making them more accessible to patients, OPA is working to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the healthcare system.

The COVID-19 pandemic has both challenged and changed the lives of all Ontarians and consequently, healthcare has in many ways evolved to adapt to measures put in place to protect the public during these unprecedented times. Through this evolution, the provision of care to patients via virtual means has become increasingly prevalent and accepted amongst providers and patients alike. Recognizing the significant opportunities presented by leveraging virtual care to improve patient access and accounting for the anticipated shift in patient preferences, OPA appreciates the development of the Virtual Care Policy by the College as a resource to help guide pharmacy professionals on the provision of virtual care and navigate the unique requirements to ensuring appropriate delivery. With this lens, OPA would like to provide the following comments and recommendations on specific sections of the draft policy.

Definitions

Within this policy, virtual care is defined as *"a professional interaction between a registrant and a patient that occurs remotely using an enabling technology, such as videoconferencing, text*

messaging, web-based and mobile applications, that facilitate registrant-patient interaction". The definition further clarifies that this care *"pertains to clinical activities beyond the regular interactions that occur with patients using a telephone."* On this definition, OPA would seek to clarify the categorization of telephone interactions that are clinical in nature, for example the provision of a MedsCheck review over the phone. As clinical consultations provided over the telephone or by virtual means are both integral to the provision of pharmacy services remotely, it would be important to note that although telephone interactions are not explicitly included in the Virtual Care Policy, many of the same principles may still be applicable, such as obtaining informed consent and maintaining patient privacy and confidentiality.

Providing Virtual Care Services

On the requirement to assess appropriateness of virtual care delivery, OPA agrees that an assessment must be made to determine whether virtual care is appropriate for the individual patient and that the benefits outweigh any risks. OPA would further highlight that when considering the patient's existing health status, specific-healthcare needs, and specific circumstances there may be subjective variations in determining benefits and risks. In addition to factors such as, but not limited to, a patient's ability to effectively access and utilize the technology through which care is delivered as well as the patient's ability to travel to the pharmacy and receive in-person care, consideration must be given to allow patient choice. In other words, the opportunity for a patient to opt to receive virtual care should be considered as a benefit when determining the benefits and risks. If it is determined that the risks do not outweigh the benefits when considering patient choice, it should be made clear that registrants may use their professional judgement to offer virtual care to patients. Ultimately, OPA recommends that in determining the appropriateness of virtual care delivery, registrants must be guided by acting in the best interest of the patient while also respecting patient choice.

With respect to privacy and confidentiality, OPA is in complete agreement that this is a legal and ethical expectation and that registrants providing virtual care must be responsible for safeguarding their patients' right to privacy by ensuring they are compliant with the *Personal Health Information Protection Act, 2004*. Recognizing that not all pharmacies may be equipped to access technology that meet or exceed the minimum controls required, OPA suggests that in exceptional circumstances where the benefits to providing care through virtual means may outweigh the risks, use of platforms that may not provide health system-level privacy and security compliance (for example encrypted unregulated applications such as Skype and Teams by Microsoft, FaceTime by Apple, and Google Handout) should be allowed if explicit informed consent is obtained from the patient or substitute decision-maker, either orally or in writing. In these exceptional circumstances registrants would be expected to document their professional judgement and ensure information transmitted is kept to a minimum and does not include any unnecessary patient information.

Funding of services

Although OPA acknowledges that discussions on funding for virtual care services and/or care that is not provided in-person are non-regulatory and are therefore outside the scope of this



consultation, the Association would nonetheless request the collaboration of the College to recognize the value of virtual care services and support the funding of these services as a means to improving patient access and care. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the ministry provided more flexibility for the provision of MedsCheck services such that pharmacists may be reimbursed for MedsChecks performed virtually, or over the phone. Recognizing that as per this Virtual Care Policy virtual care must meet or exceed all applicable standards, guidance, and legislative requirements for in-person care, it is the belief of the Association that funding for pharmacy services should be universally applicable regardless of the delivery mechanism being virtual or in-person.

Conclusion

The Ontario Pharmacists Association appreciates the opportunity to provide the College with its comments and recommendations toward the proposed draft Virtual Care Policy which outlines the College's expectations of pharmacy professionals who are interacting with patients through virtual means to provide care that is beyond the regular interactions that commonly occur using a telephone. OPA recognizes the significant opportunities presented by leveraging virtual care to improve patient access and acknowledges the importance of this policy to support the provision of virtual care to patients.

Should you have any questions or comments related to this submission, please do not hesitate to contact me at your earliest convenience at ang@opatoday.com or by phone at 416-441-0788.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Angeline Ng", is written over a light blue horizontal line.

Angeline Ng
VP, Professional Affairs

Cc: Mr. Justin J. Bates, Chief Executive Officer, Ontario Pharmacists Association
Ms. Jen Baker, Chair of the Board, Ontario Pharmacists Association