



📷 Amy Darcy, with 14-month-old son Finn and husband Reis in Canberra, used Skype while pregnant. Picture: Kym Smith

NSW

ONLINE APPOINTMENTS FOR PATIENTS TOO BUSY TO SEE MEDICS

ANNABEL HENNESSY, The Daily Telegraph

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SYDNEYSIDERS are so stressed and overworked they can't even see their psychologist in person.

Top clinicians are now seeing up to half of their patients through Skype or Facetime because they're too busy to make it to appointments.

Other psychologists are setting up "virtual clinics" inside online games. In some cases, people are being counselled under the guise of their game characters.



📷 Mrs Darcy said it could be difficult to maintain emotional connection on Skype. Picture: Kym Smith

The revelations come as the federal government investigates expanding its e-therapy services. From November, people in rural areas can claim the Medicare rebate on up to seven sessions with an online counsellor.

Federal Health Minister Greg Hunt told *The Saturday Telegraph* he would consider expanding the rebate to others who might benefit from the program — such as new mums struggling to find the time to visit a clinic.

The Saturday Telegraph can also reveal the Primary Health Networks are also exploring options to extend their “tele-health services”.

“Mental health is a personal passion and I am always open to new proposals for how we can improve and expand services,” Mr Hunt said.

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“My oldest client is actually 92.”

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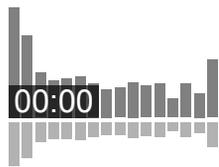
Psychologist Dan Martin, who runs Sydney clinic Personal Enrichment Services, said as people get busier, e-therapy is becoming more popular.

“A lot of my clients are people who have to travel a lot for work and have packed schedules. They might do half their sessions in person and half via Skype or Facetime or whatever medium they prefer,” he said.

Mr Martin said practitioners had to put in extra work to read a client’s body language over Skype but there were advantages to e-therapy.

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“Sometimes for people with anxiety actually getting to a clinic can be difficult so it makes it easier for clients to keep appointments,” he said.

Psychiatrist Ingrid Butterfield sees about half of her patients through video conferences.

Dr Butterfield said while she mostly treats rural patients who can’t visit a clinic, she was now getting requests from people in the city but want to use e-therapy because of their schedules.

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“It is an expanding area and as people become more familiar with technology I think it will continue to grow. My oldest client is actually 92,” she said.

“There are also advantages for the practitioner as it can allow them to work from home and sessions don’t need to be cancelled if they are travelling.”

Amy Darcy divides her time between Sydney and Canberra and had Skype sessions as a patient while she was pregnant with her son Finn.

Mrs Darcy, who runs wellness website Eat Pray Workout, said it could be difficult to “maintain emotional connection” but talking via Skype worked.

“It was really convenient and there was no way I could miss an appointment,” she said.

Mrs Darcy said she would like to see the Medicare rebate cover e-therapy.



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