

Dial-a-Doc helps patients connect with doctors during COVID-19

As it gets harder for patients in Ontario to see doctors amid the COVID-19 pandemic, a Toronto doctor is hoping to help.

Dr Mark Auspitz, MD, CCFP, has launched Dial-a-Doc, a free website that connects patients in Ontario with doctors for phone appointments.

“When a patient registers, we match them to a clinic that will call them back and provide an assessment by phone. The purpose is to try to keep as many people as possible away from emergency rooms/busy walk-in clinics. We can offer guidance for most acute conditions and if we cannot manage it over the phone, we can direct them to the most appropriate care,” says Dr Auspitz.

So far, the website has helped match over 4,000 patients with doctors since its launch recently, and Dr Auspitz estimates that around 200-250 patients have come from Aurora.

“Patients will usually get their appointment by phone within 24 hours. This service is completely free and covered by OHIP. We can refill prescriptions/order investigations as needed,” he says.

David Kramer, a patient who used the service, said, “It was simple and easy. A local doctors' office called me within 24 hours, both to schedule and then subsequently fulfill on my appointment.”

Dr Auspitz, who trained at the University of Toronto, has his own practice and also offers a walk-in service. He was motivated to help when he began to see the fallouts of the COVID-19 spread.

“A few weeks ago, during the start of the COVID-19 surge, I saw a walk-in clinic patient whom I had never met before. All she needed was a refill on her diabetes medication but her family doctor recently retired and she had no way to fill her medications. I noticed that she seemed a bit frightened during our interaction and when I asked her why, she replied that being elderly and diabetic, she was at a higher risk for COVID-19 complications.”

The interaction triggered Dr Auspitz to start Dial-a-Doc.

“One of Dial-a-Doc's roles in the current pandemic is to facilitate people filling their chronic disease medications. The current pandemic will likely last months. People missing their statins could have heart attacks. Those without insulin could go into diabetic coma. Asthmatics missing their puffers can have respiratory attacks. But it is impossible to balance these more abstract risks with the immediate risk that COVID-19 poses,” he explained, adding that a doctor on Dial-a-Doc can fax a prescription to any

pharmacy a patient chooses (many also deliver) so that someone with a medical comorbidity can stay safe at home.

Dr Auspitz's wife helped him set up the Dial-a-Doc website. He maintains that they only work with established clinics who already have their own computer system.

?Our website simply gathers some non-medical contact information for the patients and then distributes it among our existing partners who can call the patient for the appointment and document the interaction on their secure system,? he said.

Since the launch of the website, they have been able to divert close to a 1,000 people with viral cold symptoms away from emergency rooms and walk-in clinics, where they could have spread infection in the community.

?A lot of people were confused about COVID-19 and were going to the emergency room for very mild flu symptoms. This puts themselves and others at risk so we wanted a way to keep people out of the hospital. We can provide guidance on what to do with these sorts of symptoms over the phone and save on hospital visits.?

Those who do not have access to the internet can have a loved one fill out the contact form on the website using their information and a doctor would call them back by phone. For more information or to use the service, visit dialadoc.ca.

By Kinjal Dagli Shah