

Date:	May 11, 2020
To:	NH Staff, Nurse Practitioners, Physicians, Psychiatrists and Specialists
From:	Dr. Gerrard Prigmore, Northern Health Addictions Medical Lead Michelle Lawrence, Executive Lead, Mental Health and Substance Use Program Nick Rempel, Substance Use Strategic Lead
Re:	Northern Health Virtual Substance Use Clinic

Background:

On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization declared a pandemic due to the COVID-19 virus. British Columbia had an existing public health emergency due to escalating opioid overdoses and related deaths.

To assist with the provincial response to these crises, the BC Center on Substance Use (BCCSU) and the Opioid Emergency Response Centre/Ministry of Mental Health and Addictions published the clinical guideline [Risk Mitigation in the Context of Dual Public Health Emergencies](#). The document is on the BCCSU website and distributed through established provincial substance use networks and provincial peer networks.

The recommendations in this clinical guideline outline pharmacotherapy approaches for patients seeking to abstain or reduce their substance use. For those who are unable to reduce their use, the guideline provides prescribing recommendations that facilitate self-isolation without the need to seek street drugs, thereby reducing potential for overdose, unsafe withdrawal, and transmission of COVID-19 within this population and the broader public.

Northern Health is implementing a regional virtual substance use clinic to enhance patient access to these protocols.

Overview of the Clinic

The virtual substance use clinic is an addition to the [Northern Health COVID-19 Online Clinic and Information Line](#). The following process describes how a client will access the service and accompanying follow-up:

1. Client calls the Northern Health COVID-19 Online Clinic and Information Line (1-844-645-7811)
2. Client answers screening questions from the online clinic team to gather medical COVID-19 risk information, substance use history, and identify client goal (OAT access, withdrawal prevention, pharmaceutical alternatives to toxic street drug supply, etc.)
3. Client is connected to a local service, where available. Where this is not possible, client is connected virtually to a care provider for a consultation through the following steps:
 - a. Substance use virtual clinic support staff provide local program contact information and assist with referral if the client has access to local resources

- b. If no local resource exists or access is not possible, a consultation is scheduled with the client and a virtual care provider
 - c. The consultation is entered into the electronic medical record and a notification is sent to the primary care provider through the system
4. Care provider performs an assessment and, where appropriate, initiates pharmaceutical treatment for the client
5. Prescription is issued to nearest pharmacy where the medication can be picked up, delivered, or daily witnessed, depending on the care plan for the client. The prescription may also be filled and taken to the isolation space by the client, delivered by pharmacy, or delivered by an outreach team or patient representative.
6. Follow-up and monitoring is arranged for the client with the closest appropriate health care service
7. A follow-up appointment with the virtual clinic is arranged, where indicated, or handed over to the closest available service

Considerations for Community Services

It is the intention of the virtual substance use clinic to connect clients who receive virtual support to the closest local service for follow-up. This involves primary care teams and specialized services programs across Northern Health who support people who use substances, provide OAT, and/or are engaged in the partnership work with BC Housing in supporting people who are accessing emergency shelter spaces for self-isolation. It is anticipated that the referrals would be issued to the central intake system in each community and would typically include requests for follow-up and monitoring for clients who receive care under this provincial guideline, assistance with delivery of medication (where this is offered by Northern Health staff), and supporting the linkage to a primary care provider.

For any questions and feedback, contact Nick Rempel, Substance Use Strategic Lead at 250-565-2960 or Nick.Rempel@northernhealth.ca.