

Quebec brothers develop 24/7 virtual pharmacist connection

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When Don Nguyen has health questions, he often turns to his brother, Van, a pharmacist-owner in Laval, Que.

But the pandemic made such exchanges more difficult, yet all the more critical.

The brothers realized other Canadians were surely feeling the same disconnect from their normally accessible health professionals. So they launched Telepharma.ca, a Quebec-based online platform that enables 24/7 remote access to a pharmacist.

“People want accessibility. They want a pharmacy at their fingertips,” says Don Nguyen.

While online pharmacy sites like this are already rare in Canada, Telepharma.ca has a particular emphasis, he says. “Our model is focused on consultation.”

COVID-19 drove consultations online, with platforms like Zoom helping to make such connections commonplace. “People have gotten used to virtual communication,” says Nguyen.

Those reluctant to leave home, mired in a lockdown or who simply prefer their cellphone over a face-to-face chat, can use Telepharma.ca to quickly access a pharmacist any time of the day or night by telephone, online chat, text message or videoconference. “There is no receptionist. There is no technician. Patients are directed to pharmacists,” says Nguyen.

For now, pharmacists can provide answers in French, English, Spanish and Vietnamese, set to expand to Chinese and Arabic soon, he says.

Nguyen points out an online pharmacy can ease congestion in local hospitals and clinics while reducing non-essential contact during a pandemic.

Clients can also refill a prescription and have it delivered directly to their home. No file transfer is required, although a physical prescription is. For those scripts not faxed directly by a physician, users can upload them on an encrypted platform or hand them over upon delivery. The service offers delivery across Quebec, with customers in the Greater Montreal area getting their medication same day, and the rest of the province within 24 to 48 hours.

Telepharma.ca also offers patients the option of accessing a bricks and mortar pharmacy. The independent Van Nguyen Pharmacy, located in a Laval medical centre, is accessible to those who prefer in-person services. The business, notes Nguyen, uses a hybrid model. “It’s where COVID pushed a lot of companies.”

There are consultations every day, he adds, but firm numbers are not available, in large part for privacy reasons.

All Telepharma.ca services are offered free of charge and are available only in Quebec. There are no plans to expand outside the province, says Nguyen.

However, the company may partner with other local pharmacies to offer more physical access points. “For the moment, we’re keeping it family based. We’d like to be a virtual brand, but first we’re seeing if the model is sustainable.”