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# Cutting the cost of video consultations

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Ramana Panda has developed software tool that allows doctors to access specialist advice for their patients by computer using 130 kilobits per second of bandwidth. Picture: Kit Wise Source: Supplied

### **GERARD Thill spent months looking for a hip replacement specialist on the public books but could find only one - located 10 hours away.**

Then an online video consultation, which costs less than a caffe latte using advanced compression techniques, has made the impossible possible.

"It was ruining my life," Mr Thill said. "I couldn't even go for walks with my wife, let alone work properly. I wanted to get a surgeon on the public system to do it for free but couldn't find any except at Bowral Hospital."

Frustrated and in pain, the NSW builder, who lives at Tweed Heads near the Queensland border, turned to his general practitioner, Gold Coast-based Ramana Panda, for help. "He told me to come in to do a video consultation with the surgeon," Mr Thill said. "I couldn't imagine how that could help."

Unbeknown to him, Dr Panda had already scanned and sent his X-rays to the surgeon at Bowral before their meeting.

Once there, Dr Panda fired up his laptop, clicked on an icon and they started a videoconference session with the specialist.

Mr Thill described the session as "extraordinary" and said the 30-minute session was "smooth and seamless".

"It was like being in the same room, like he was sitting on the other side of the table.

"It saved me the long trip to Bowral and really eased my mind when the specialist said I would be all right for surgery," Mr Thill said.

His story is one of many shared by other patients who have used the videoconferencing tool.

That video consultation was no ordinary Skype or FaceTime session. It used software developed by Dr Panda and his team at Telehealthnetworks, which he runs.

His free videoconferencing software, dubbed Telehealthnetworks System and Online Scheduler, works on desktops and laptops. It can be downloaded at no cost on Apple's App Store under the name VizzyConf.

The beauty about the app is that it only requires 130 kilobits per second of bandwidth to work.

Dr Panda said the software used special algorithms to compress file sizes so it didn't guzzle bandwidth.

He said it was crucial to keep the video transfer rates at a bare minimum because specialists would have to pick up the tab for the videoconferencing sessions, although the cost was low.

Doctors download the app and are provided with a secure login and password but pay nothing except for the connection.

Specialists would have to pay their telco \$5 for a 30-minute video session on 3G for 66 megabyte of data consumed, Dr Panda estimated.

He said the app was suitable for doctors who were always on the move, especially those who had to alternate between locations.

In developing the product, Dr Panda relied on experience from his 15-year stint working as a GP in rural and remote areas where internet connectivity was woeful.

He said in the past patients had to be choppered to the nearest hospital at a cost of about \$5000 to \$7000 to the health service just for an initial consultation. "If I did that three times a month that would cost \$15,000 to the health service," Dr Panda said.

He said security was key as his software transmitted images, files and videos of sensitive information. The software has been around for more than a year and has already garnered 150 users but Dr Panda hopes the videoconferencing sessions can be subsidised through Medicare.

"We're trying to roll this out throughout Australia and we're trying to lobby the government through the relevant associations for Medicare rebates. At the moment there are no rebates.

"We're trying to impress upon the government that this can save a lot of money and reduce the stress on the healthcare system by avoiding non-essential visits to hospitals," Dr Panda said.