Does Telemedicine Have a Future?
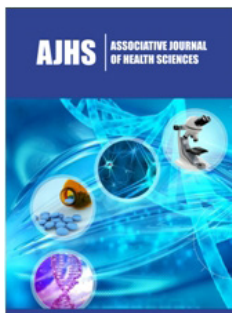
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Opinion

Telemedicine is a technology that has been around for some time, but the COVID-19 pandemic made many people understand the value of telehealth when used in clinical settings. With existing telemedicine technology, people can already receive care in home settings by interacting with healthcare professionals without going to physical health facilities. The benefits of the technology have been significant, but questions remain about whether the technology will have a future going forward. On the balance of probability, telemedicine will likely be practiced in the near future.

One aspect that supports this view is that telemedicine is a unique and straightforward way of extending care to patients remotely. When able to access care without having to visit healthcare facilities, patients are likely to embrace such technologies. Hence, telemedicine will be used to deliver care to patients who might not need to visit healthcare facilities or who might be unable to make in-person visits for any number of reasons [1]. The flexibility that telemedicine offers will not fade away, but new areas that can further improve the delivery of care will also emerge.

With telemedicine, the treatment of mental and behavioural health problems especially stands to gain. The possible impacts of telemedicine in these areas have already manifested during the COVID-19 pandemic, and with the realisation that many people suffer from mental and behavioural conditions, health providers will use telemedicine to provide health interventions to patients [2]. For example, telemedicine can be used to promote interventions such as group therapies through video-conferencing technologies [2]. A healthcare provider using telemedicine in this way can attend to many patients at once, functionality that will make the technology become a key component in the delivery of health interventions. In addition, telemedicine will likely be used for training healthcare professionals, which will be especially useful during public health emergencies. Given the urgency of such situations, telemedicine could be adopted to help fill gaps in knowledge and skills needed for those responding to emergency situations [3]. These potential applications imply the future of telemedicine is promising as it can be adopted to advance healthcare from different perspectives.

However, like with many other emerging technologies, the application and realisation of telemedicine benefits will not be straightforward. Some issues will first need to be overcome for the technology to generate benefits. One such issue that must be overcome before telemedicine benefits manifest in healthcare relates to the integration of the technology into the health systems. After all, telemedicine works only when health professionals understand it and have the relevant competencies, such as strong communication skills [4]. According to a study by White et al. [4], gaps still exist regarding the ways in which healthcare professionals implement telehealth. For instance, while the Australian Department of Health recommends video as the main mode of consultation, 90% of consultations done in Australia during the

Covid Pandemic period involved telephone only, meaning that compliance with the recommendation remains a problem [4]. The ultimate goal is to drive mass integration of telemedicine so that healthcare organisations and patients seeking care from those organisations can derive the benefits.

The second important issue that must be addressed to ensure telemedicine is implemented successfully is the establishment of a regulatory framework and legislation to guide the implementation of telehealth technologies. Currently, gaps in existing legislation create challenges related to the implementation of the technology. An established legal framework and legislation are what will eventually make healthcare facilities be more receptive to the technology when it comes to promoting quality healthcare services [5]. Based on these dynamics, stakeholders must join hands and establish the appropriate legislative standards and rules to be used when implementing telemedicine technology. Only when such actions materialise will there be better organisation around promoting and adopting telehealth to promote healthcare deliveries to patients remotely.

Lastly, some ethical issues must also be overcome for telemedicine to be successful in the future. One ethical concern is privacy and confidentiality. Telemedicine gathers voluminous data on patients, and how that information gets safely preserved and responsibly used remains unclear. Therefore, some elements of accountability and transparency must be established for with use of the telehealth technology. Another challenge relates to the status of telemedicine when used as a medium to deliver interventions [5]. With interventions through telemedicine, a balance of power must exist between face-to-face interactions between healthcare providers and patients' and interactions between healthcare providers and patients using technology. If telemedicine dominates, it raises questions about whether machines will eventually replace health professionals in conducting consultations [4]. This issue has already surfaced in different clinical settings since healthcare providers' physical interactions with patients are also vital for advancing health outcomes.

Based on the above dynamics, the prospects of telemedicine becoming widespread are high. Yet the dynamics in the healthcare sector also suggest that barriers to the successful adoption of telemedicine must be addressed proactively to limit the risk of failure. Collaboration among diverse stakeholders is ultimately needed to improve the levels of integrating telehealth at different levels of society, from the organisational level to the country level. Much like banks, healthcare organisations need efficient and similar systems to realise the benefits of technologies.

References

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