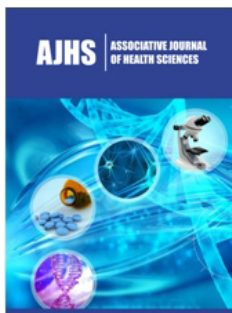


The Future of Telehealth in a Post-Pandemic World

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ISSN: 2690-9707



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Submission:  January 04, 2023

Published:  January 09, 2023

Volume 2 - Issue 3

How to cite this article: Grant R Muddle. The Future of Telehealth in a Post-Pandemic World. *Associative J Health Sci.* 2(3). AJHS. 000536. 2023. DOI: [10.31031/AJHS.2023.02.000536](https://doi.org/10.31031/AJHS.2023.02.000536)

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Opinion

The 21st century has witnessed different technologies being applied in many fields. And healthcare is no exception since various technologies impact the field in unique and important ways. One key technology that has emerged in healthcare is telemedicine or telehealth. Telemedicine is a technology that uses information systems and smart devices (e.g., video conferencing) to promote the delivery of healthcare services remotely. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the adoption of telemedicine became widespread as it facilitated the delivery of healthcare services outside physical health facilities. The benefits of the technology were witnessed over and over again as patients could still receive consultations and other aspects of effective care, such as patient education and follow up using the telemedicine related technology. With the fall in COVID-19 infection levels, debates have focused on whether the telemedicine technology will continue being used as it was during the pandemic. Considering the trends in the health sector, some indicators suggest telemedicine will be adopted even more widely going forward.

One trend in healthcare that underpins the view that telemedicine will continue being a pivotal component of the healthcare delivery model is the increase in chronic health conditions. Data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics show that 47% of Australians experience at least one chronic health condition in 2017-2018 period, up from 42% in 2007-2008 period [1]. Since chronic health condition outcomes depend on patient knowledge of the relevant health issues, telemedicine will, arguably, be used significantly more often in managing chronic health issues. In other words, the increase in chronic health conditions suggests that telemedicine will be used to advance quality health outcomes for patients with chronic health issues. Patients who use telemedicine will not have to travel to physical facilities while seeking consultations, hence, telemedicine still has viability in a post-pandemic world [1].

The second aspect that indicates telemedicine will become a mainstay component of healthcare delivery models post-COVID-19 is the need to cut costs [2]. In many parts of the world, healthcare sectors struggle with controlling expenses. Part of the reason is that some non-emergency conditions that can be addressed in homecare settings migrate into primary care. With telemedicine, the management of such health issues will be made easier since health providers will interact with patients and give advice remotely [2]. These dynamics will be beneficial to healthcare facilities and the patients who seek care from such facilities. In other words, the technology will offer new opportunities that healthcare organisations will use to manage patients outside clinical settings.

Also notable in the telemedicine discussion is the concept of holistic care, which requires continuous interactions between health providers and their patients. No better ways exist to realise this objective than involving patients through telemedicine. Doctors and nurses undeniably must attend to many patients, and in some cases, doctors may lack the time needed

to effectively interact with all their patients within the clinical settings [3]. Through telemedicine, however, patients can interact with health providers outside the clinical settings. Telemedicine will therefore be used to enhance user experience, which is also essential to realise quality healthcare. For example, telemedicine can assist health providers to complete patient follow-up even after patients have been discharged, and in the process, the interactions, and therapeutic relationships between doctors and their patients are enhanced [4]. This post clinical interactions that telemedicine provides will improve the quality of healthcare services that patients receive.

At the same time, telehealth will also be used to complement other data-sharing technologies, which will improve the understanding of patients' health issues. Different telehealth applications are starting to use and communicate with fitness applications, for example, and such communications provide important data on patients' health. In this context, the technology of telemedicine will help health professionals track and act on data when it is still appropriate.

Such an approach will allow health organisations to generate data belonging to patients' health statuses, which will improve the quality of the interventions provided to them [5]. These key aspects indicate that telehealth still has a future in a post-pandemic world by continuing to be applied in different circumstances and contexts to facilitate better healthcare deliveries.

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