

EDITORIAL

Improving Telemedicine Practice in Nigeria

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Telemedicine which is the use of technology to deliver healthcare remotely, obviates the need for physical meeting between patients and healthcare providers. In so doing, it addresses barriers to access, improves healthcare delivery, and enhances the overall health outcomes especially for people residing in areas where healthcare infrastructure is limited.

The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the application of telemedicine although at the time it was meant to prevent contact between patients and healthcare providers in order to limit the spread of the disease worldwide.¹ The western and developed countries have leveraged on this and further developed telemedicine, however, in many low-to-middle income countries including Nigeria, it is still practiced in its basic form.

There are three aspects to telemedicine - store-and-forward, remote monitoring and real time interactive services. Telephone consultation, a basic form of interactive services is the most commonly used form of telemedicine as noted by previous workers and corroborated in the publication by Ogboghodo et al.² Teleconsultation can be used as a tool to extend healthcare services to currently under-served rural and hard-to-reach areas where healthcare worker to patient ratio is low, and access to specialist care is even more limited.

Considering the large Nigerian population, and the fragile health infrastructure, patients are often required to travel long distances to access specialist care which in most cases, is only available in urban and some major cities. Telemedicine will serve as a lifeline to bridge the yawning gap in access to healthcare by the citizenry. When practiced properly, it is cost-effective, saving patients cost of travelling to and fro the healthcare facility, cost of man hours lost

in long waiting time and absence from work. Previous work has shown that cost of traveling constitute a major cost of healthcare amongst Nigerian.³

The need to expand the utility of the available specialists using telemedicine to reach more Nigerians has become imperative in the face of the growing brain drain in the healthcare sector. Telemedicine will assume a veritable tool in bridging the widening specialist to patient gap. An initial assessment of patients requiring a particular specialist care can be done remotely to triage and identify the ones that will be require further in-person evaluation in a secondary or tertiary facility. For example, a lot can be facilitated through tele-dermatology where clear images of skin conditions or other lesions can facilitate making proper diagnoses and instituting appropriate treatment promptly. The widespread use of smart phones and the penetration of internet connectivity into our rural areas and hitherto difficult-to-reach areas will facilitate the actualization telemedicine in our clime.

Other more advanced forms of interactive services of telemedicine that can be explored are available in few tertiary healthcare facilities in the country, mostly due to cost of setting up. An example is live conferencing which facilitates the exchange of knowledge and expertise, allowing local healthcare professionals to consult with specialists, leading to more accurate diagnoses and effective treatment plans. The collaborative nature of telemedicine promotes continuous learning and skill development among healthcare providers in resource-poor settings.

One major challenge in the use of telemedicine in Nigeria is that the regulatory framework for its use is still evolving. Currently, there is no policy guidelines regulating its practice in Nigeria which does not allow the unfettered embrace of the telemedicine by all stakeholders or its extension to other advanced utility because of possible medico-legal issues that could arise. Legal guidance on its practice is however, provided for by other existing laws

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such as the code of medical ethics, the Nigerian data protection act and the national information technology development agency amongst others, which deals with certain aspects of the practice of telemedicine. A national policy on telemedicine will not only provide a framework for its operation but also a legal regulation.⁴

In conclusion, the practice of telemedicine is currently in its infantile form in Nigeria. A robust and advanced practice of telemedicine can be established through the formulation of a national policy on telemedicine backed with legislation to regulate its operations. Telemedicine holds the potential for greatly improving access to cost-effective healthcare for more Nigerians as it plays a pivotal role in overcoming geographical and logistical challenges.

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