

Now is the right time for SA to embrace telmedicine

Vuyo Mkize: City Press, 19 April 2020

The Covid-19 coronavirus outbreak has necessitated a “business unusual” approach for health professionals, as many are now doing consultations with patients online or by telephone, a change that one industry body hopes will be the way people access some forms of healthcare. As South Africa battles to contain the spread of new Covid-19 infections, doctors are turning to telemedicine - also known as telehealth - to help limit the foot traffic into consulting rooms in efforts.

And with social distancing likely to be

with us for several months after the easing of the national lockdown restrictions, telemedicine might just be what the doctor ordered to keep people from crowded doctor’ rooms and unnecessary travel, which might expose them to cross-contamination.

The Health Professions Council of SA (HPCSA) previously banned all forms of telemedicine. However, since the local outbreak of Covid-19, the SA Medical Association has been raising its members’ concerns with the HPCSA. It has pointed out that its members are at high risk of contracting the virus and called for the council to amend its regulations.

The way of the future?

Recently, the HPCSA heeded this call, but only for the duration of the Covid-19 outbreak. and for doctors to help only existing patients via video calls. Psychologists will, however, be allowed to use video or telephone calls to counsel new patients. But should this be adopted as the way we access healthcare in the future? Rajesh Patel, head of benefit and risk at the Board of Healthcare Funders, said that if you look at international trends, we are behind in SA. He said the HPCSA hasn’t kept up with the different ways of looking after patients. Patel said it is an essential reform in the way that healthcare is accessed in terms of efficiency and affordability. He said the HPCSA’s arm has been twisted this time around because of the pandemic but asked why this can’t be a sustainable long-term solution.

Efficient solutions

Patel said SA is going through a massive health reform - National Health Insurance - and without enough professionals we need to find efficient solutions for the people to access care, and telehealth happens to be one of them. Priscilla Sekhonyana, the HPCSA spokesperson, said while the general response to the guidelines amendment allowing for telemedicine has been positive among local practitioners, the council is still conducting an environmental scan to find lasting solutions for South Africa, which has a wide healthcare delivery resource gap. The HPCSA said it did not have detailed statistics on the number of its practitioners who had taken up telehealth as part of their services, but based on the feedback they were receiving, the utilisation rate was “above average”. Sekhonyana said the council has always supported telemedicine practice as much as the National Department of Health and the World Health Organisation (WHO).

She said the amendments to the guidelines are to support government efforts to stop the spread of the pandemic and the council is working on a lasting solution to ensure that the policies and regulations find a balance between the technological advances and its mandate of protection of the public and to guide the profession.

According to the WHO, the term telemedicine was coined in the 1970s and means “healing at a distance”. It further broadly defines it as: “The delivery of healthcare services, where distance is a critical factor, by all healthcare professionals using information and communication technologies for the diagnosis treatment and prevention of disease and injuries...

In the US, the UK, Finland, Taiwan and in parts of Europe, telehealth has been incorporated into healthcare systems.

• **An additional 124 cases of Covid-19 were reported on Sunday evening, as the SA total climbed to 3 158. Two more deaths were reported, meaning that 54 people have now died in SA from the respiratory illness caused by the coronavirus. The total number of tests conducted to date is 114,711 - an increase of about 6 700 from the 108 021 reported on Saturday.**