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ASIA EDITION

Overcoming challenges faced by telehealth adoption

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One year into the COVID-19 pandemic, the adoption of digital health technologies has burgeoned, but it has not been without challenges. As we begin to live in a new normal with the virus, a phase which scientists now term as an 'endemic', we will continue to see small outbreaks and evolving strains of the virus across the globe. The healthcare sector is front and center of these changing conditions. It is time we reevaluate how we can better support frontline medical professionals to respond swiftly and adapt to meet the changing demands.

The accelerated rate of technological advancement seen during the peak of the pandemic has slowed down yet made more progress as compared to pre-pandemic times. In Asia Pacific, the digital health industry is booming. The telehealth market in China is estimated to reach USD$54.2 billion by 2025. Similarly, Indonesia and Australia have also seen a 39 percent and 40 percent surge in telehealth users respectively.

While there are many benefits to adopting telehealth technology, a misconception remains around the quality of care received. Patients tend to perceive care provided over telehealth sessions to be of lower quality as compared to in-person visits. During digital consultations, clinicians are highly dependent on the information shared by the patient and might overlook physical cues which are not visible on camera. The lack of physical examination was cited as one of the biggest concerns around

telehealth, especially for patients with multi-system problems which are harder to detect over video conference. We must bear in mind the challenges that patients with sensory impairments and differences face when using telehealth services. In the UK, where I'm based, the NHS England has issued a new guidance to general practitioners, ensuring that they offer face-to-face consultations for their patients. This provides patients with the choice in deciding on their preferred consultation mode.

Sustaining new models of care

Digital health technologies are here to stay and for it to be sustainable in the long term, it is essential for healthcare providers to address the issue around the quality of care received. Firstly, being able to capture the right records to make informed clinical decisions is important. Here is where having a robust electronic health record (EHR) system helps. Data can now be securely shared from hospitals to homes via an interoperable system. Further to that, the EHR system needs to be augmented with a clinical decision support system aligned to global care standards, that enable clinicians to make accurate, evidence-based clinical decisions when seeing the patient remotely. This ensures that the care provided to patients virtually is of the same quality as that of an in-person visit.

To tackle concerns of impersonal patient experiences, healthcare professionals need to effectively communicate with patients over the phone and video. New training programs must encourage critical thinking and provide a more accurate assessment of patients, despite reduced levels of visual acuity and distorted noise. Healthcare professionals should also empathize with patients virtually. For instance, my mother was told over the phone that she may have only up to five years of life expectancy for a disease that was not fully explained to her. She was offered generic solutions, that did not seem to treat the root of her condition. It is important for healthcare professionals to understand patients and their context, build rapport and improve patient engagement over a telehealth session.

Once healthcare professionals have established rapport and understanding with patients, we need to ensure that the digital consultation will be more interactive and beneficial for both parties. Elsevier's Interactive Patient Education provides an array of interactive materials to explain diagnoses, treatments, medications, lifestyle modifications in an easy-to-understand format. When patients actively participate in their health conversations, having accurate and timely evidence-based knowledge helps clinicians provide patients with the right answers at the right time to treat the patient's health condition safely and efficiently. Ultimately, answering all their questions and improving patient engagement.

Digital technologies are becoming more widespread. We need to increase acceptance of it among the less digitally savvy and invest in better telehealth infrastructure for a digital future. Furthermore, with the rise of the Internet of Things (IoT), health-related data generated from these devices will be integrated with telehealth services and transmitted in real-time to health professionals. This reinforces the need for a robust interoperable data capture system to allow for a holistic view of the patient information, regardless of device or location.