

Telemedicine makes healthcare more accessible

By [Helen Weber](#)

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Forty-three percent of South Africa's population lives in rural regions, with just one physician responsible for 7,700 people, according to the World Health Organisation (WHO). With limited options, telemedicine has the potential to make healthcare far more accessible, as technology evolves.



Image source: Getty/Gallo

These days, you can apply a biosensing patch and give your doctor instant updates on your blood sugars via phone and a wearable device can send an electrocardiogram to your nearest heart specialist. The possibilities for primary healthcare, insurance and innovation are exciting and cost-efficient.

Telemedicine is not new, but it's evolving fast, and new technologies, big data and machine learning enable insurers to enhance the client experience through increasingly personalised underwriting. This, in turn, can help provide the necessary data to enable insurers to offer more after-claim medical management options such as apps to help with diabetes monitoring and management.

"The first reference to telemedicine started in April 1924, when [Radio News foreshadowed telemedicine in its depiction of a "radio doctor"](#) linked to a picture, not only by sound but also by a live picture.

Telemedicine was adopted in the South African public health sector in the late '90s and used primarily for pathology and radiology services. Other clinical applications include teleconsultations, telecardiology (heart), teledermatology (skin), telegynaecology (gynaecology) and many more telespecialist consultations.

The US has reported a significant reduction in healthcare costs since the implementation of telemedicine in everyday clinical practices. It has enormous potential to bridge the gap in Africa's most rural regions, where no or very few specialists are available. WHO reports that Africa is home to 14% of the world's population and struggles with 24% of the global burden of disease – but only hosts 3% of the world's healthcare workers. With telemedicine, rural patients can have access to a specialist through videoconferencing, teleradiology and telepathology.

Implementing digital health records is making it possible for South African patients to see healthcare practitioners anywhere in the country.

Advantages

- **It saves costs and time**

Instead of moving staff and equipment, you bring the doctor to the patient with minimal costs incurred by patients, hospitals, medical aids and health insurers

- **It increases access to healthcare and specialist care**

Patients no longer have to wait to see a specialist at a hospital as results can be sent straight to the specialist, reducing hospitalisation costs. Additionally, telemedicine and online medical records can give all stakeholders access to blood tests and special investigations, reducing duplication and therefore saving costs. Access to healthcare or medical records can be done any time of the day or night.

- **It could help personalise insurance**

New technologies, big data and machine learning mean insurers can enhance the client experience through increasingly personalised underwriting. Telemedicine could help provide the data required and assist insurers to offer more after-claim medical management options, such as apps to help with diabetes monitoring and management.

- **It may assist employers to offer better primary healthcare options**

Telemedicine could be a cost-effective option for employers to assist employees to manage chronic conditions, illnesses and general wellness through access to practitioners and health education. This could help curb [SA's dramatic absenteeism rates](#).

- **It facilitates value-based care**

Value-based care refers to a healthcare model where doctors and hospitals are remunerated based on patient outcomes; this is made possible with patient medical data and hospital data.

- **It provides health education**

There's an influx of apps and wearables that aim to educate people on how to live a healthy life – such as calorie consumption and step counter. Telemedicine offers more health education awareness for the general public and access to on-going education for healthcare workers in remote regions.

- **It catalyses innovation**

Myriad technologies are advancing that complement telemedicine – for example, we're seeing the beginning of 3D organ printing (bioprinting) which shows promise for organ transplant patients. In terms of telemedicine options already available in SA, there's a 24-hour baby hotline, a diabetes coaching service, second-opinion sourcing from Medigo and Hello doctor, a mobile app with medical information and advice – to name but a few. Going forward, there'll probably be more integration of wearables and innovations like digital tattoos to monitor blood sugars.

Telemedicine oversight is key and is governed by the Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA) from a professional healthcare perspective, and by data and private information regulations like the Protection of Personal Information Act (PoPI) from a tech standpoint. Of course, the security of private information is imperative. This is something likely to evolve considerably as data protection tightens and telemedicine continues to grow in global popularity.

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