

PROFILE: Telemedicine Africa

Providing remote healthcare in South Africa through a virtual consultation center



Challenge

Rural health care in South Africa is poor. Lacking specialists, rural hospitals rely on transport to larger medical institutions, which may also lack the needed equipment and personnel. Telemedicine can link facilities to bring specialist opinions to rural patients' bedsides. The technology can obviate the need to transport patients to more sophisticated facilities, a practice that is expensive, complicated, and onerous for both patients and their families.

Innovation

Founded in 2008, Telemedicine Africa (www.telemedafrica.co.za) is a for-profit company that provides training, implementation, and ongoing consulting services over the Internet. In Limpopo, South Africa's poorest province, it works with 14 regional hospitals, covering the entire province. The company operates a virtual telemedicine consultation center that makes specialists and general practitioners available to patients across Limpopo. The center is linked to patients through a variety of partners, including rural clinics, village hospitals, and provincial hospitals; mining clinics; schools; and correctional facilities.

Telemedicine Africa sets up a virtual telehealth center for each partner, providing telemedicine and videoconferencing equipment as well as an administrator and a technician, who assist local healthcare workers with the use of the equipment. Assistance is available to any partner site once it purchases the equipment and is connected to the virtual telemedicine consultation center. South Africans are covered by a health insurance under which they pay USD 2 per consultation. They pay no extra charge for the telemedicine consult, which is paid for by the government. Telemedicine Africa also provides assessment for tele-surveillance (the use of data collection tools to gather information) in 14 other African countries and coordinates telemedicine training for local staff.

Impact

The system provides rural residents and prisoners with access to good-quality care that would otherwise be unavailable and saves millions of dollars on travel and transport. It also improves training of healthcare personnel. Telemedicine Africa is having an impact in other ways as well. It helped the Southern African Development Community (SADC) prepare a regional report on human trafficking by allowing its facilities to be used to interview victims, police officers, social workers, and victim protection activists. Its technology can also be used to track outbreaks and other important health-related trends.

Scaling Up

Several factors account for Telemedicine Africa's success. Patients are more at ease and accepting of the use of telemedicine than they once were. It has tapped relevant contact points for rural South Africans, such as schools, mining clinics and prisons.

However, key challenges to scaling include the slow rate of technology adoption; weak Internet connectivity, especially in rural areas; and limited funding as most telemedicine programs are funded by governments or donors. Still, there are strong potential clients in remote areas, such as mining companies and prisons, that could also benefit from telemedicine services.