



Why Telemedicine isn't going anywhere and why you need to be ready for it...

Neil Kinsley, CEO of Medici Africa says...Telehealth is no longer just a nice to have, it's become a necessity. It took a pandemic for telehealth to shine and become a part of life. As Medici, we have experienced a spike in virtual visits all around the world. We've also been saying, that within the next five to six years, virtual consults will outnumber physical in office visits. The truth is, that the pandemic has brought this forward by two to three years, with predictions of up to 30% of consultations being done virtually, by the end of this year, and you really can't afford to be left behind.

Based on research conducted by Sage Growth Partner (SGP) and Black Book Market Research, it was found that 33% of patients would consider leaving their current practitioner, if they did not offer some form of telemedicine, in favour for one who did. So, whilst COVID-19 brought telemedicine to the fore, will it stay around after things go back to "normal"?

We believe so and this is why...

There isn't a Better Time Than Now

As South Africans went under lockdown, so there was a frenzy to find an alternative solution to in-office consultations. Telemedicine was the obvious go-to solution and was touted as the answer to treating COVID-19 patients, while maintaining social distancing. The truth is that people are still needing care for day to day conditions. People still get sick, pandemic or not. I think it was an error for some to advertise telemedicine as a solution for COVID-19. It was, in fact, a solution for everything during COVID-19, and we saw care being extended for everything from oncology follow ups to sport injuries.

A dermatologist told me how telemedicine had saved his practice. He needed a way to follow up on patients, refill their scripts, and monitor patients under treatment. Telemedicine made this possible. He never thought he would use telemedicine as much as he did and intends to continue way into the future. It's become a part of his practice, as his patients have experienced the convenience and time saving benefits of telemedicine.

One area that has seen a huge increase in usage, is in the discipline of behavioural health. In a recent survey, 45% of respondents said that their mental health had been impacted by the pandemic and the

lockdown. The use of telemedicine for mental health has hit record highs. The pandemic has shown that telemedicine is a viable solution for existing patients, as well as an influx of new ones.

A therapist, who was no stranger to telemedicine, even before COVID-19, reported an increase in patients reaching out for psychiatric support, as well as an increase in domestic violence. She found text functionality to be extremely helpful, as it was not always possible to conduct video calls in such cases.

Regulatory Barriers are Lowered (at least for now)

Before COVID-19, I was working hard, together with the Digital HealthCare Association, to lobby for regulatory amendments to the guidelines, as set out by the HPCSA. In a matter of weeks, changes that would have taken years, were implemented.

These regulatory changes have, at least temporarily, reduced or eliminated barriers that previously existed, in an effort to encourage both providers and patients to opt for telehealth over in-person visits. This, together with the need for social distancing and the desire to save PPE's for frontline staff, all pointed to the efficiencies embedded in telemedicine.

The existing HPCSA guidelines only recognised telemedicine between practitioner to practitioner and then still required a pre-existing relationship to be in place. Our regulations didn't recognise patient to doctor virtual care.

All of this fell away with the advent of the pandemic and the institution of 'lockdowns' and within a few short weeks, made way for telemedicine to open up and shine. Practitioners embraced telemedicine, learnt what was appropriate, quickly understood the complexities associated with medical aid funding, introduced it to their patients and we saw practices flourish, with no dramatic impact on revenue. Quality care was extended even during the most stringent social distancing requirements, patients were cured, and doctors got paid. We saw patients get follow-up care and I even had instruction on how to remove a stitch – all using telemedicine.

Clarification of Remuneration

Prior to COVID-19, practitioners using telemedicine were generally not paid anywhere near what an in-office visit would cost. Not every medical aid paid for virtual care. Some did, some didn't, some might and some never would. Just getting to understand, which codes needed to be used was a challenge in itself. There was really very little reason to adopt telemedicine in a broader sense, especially if you never knew if and whether you would be paid. To be fair, some of the more progressive funds saw the benefit of telemedicine and offered it as a benefit long before COVID-19 was even thought of. Discovery, Profmed, Bankmed and MMI were just some of the funds who adopted telemedicine in that time.

Codes have now been put into place, practice management systems updated, and remunerations increased and clarified, turning telemedicine into a financially viable option for any practice. As Medici, we have seen so many great examples of practices, sticking to it, not giving up and getting

their patients to use telemedicine. They have become used to it and will continue long after COVID-19 has run its course.

Tech just gets better and better...

I've said many times that we believe patients want more than just video technology and when you're able to combine text, video calling and telephonic calls, you really are putting all available channels together. The truth is that there are limitations to all of these, but the great thing about tech is that it gets better every day. We're starting to see remote usage of stethoscopes, infrared thermometers, and so many other examples. Telemedicine is as limited as our ideas on how to use it. As the first mobile phones evolved over time, becoming something, we just can't live without, so too will telemedicine technology. 5G is in place to make the tech even better...let's hope that regulations keep up.

To the Future...

As a practitioner said to me not so long ago, ignoring telemedicine is like ignoring the biggest thing that has happened to us in years. I have seen how those who were using telemedicine pre-COVID-19, simply continue to care for their patients, while others have spent their time debating end-to-end encryption, data security, screen sharing, different video solutions and so on. My suggestion is to be ahead of the curve so as not to be left behind, so be ready, there is no better time than now to adopt a telemedicine/telehealth solution.

None of us know what a post COVID-19 world will look like, but I think we know now that telemedicine will continue to evolve and be a part of our lives. Statistics are already showing that up to 30% of in-office visits will be virtual by the end of the year.

If the big companies like Apple and Google are starting to put their heads together to develop track and trace technology, identifying individuals who come into contact with a COVID-19 infected person and then predict outbreaks before they happen, they know that tele-tech is here to stay.

Until we have a vaccine, we will need to continue to tread with caution, practice social distancing, avoid large gatherings and telemedicine will remain to provide a solution to safety in your practice.

Things are changing so quickly, and I have no doubt that but the time you read this, there will be yet another video platform on the scene as businesses see the benefits of developing digital solutions to solve healthcare needs.

I would caution here that you need to be aware of what to look for, the regulations, data security issues and most importantly, your liability coverage, as not all platforms have been specifically created understanding the sector, we as healthcare providers, work in.

What is abundantly clear though, is that the ever evolving telemedicine platform is something that will be a part of our daily lives, for a long time to come...be sure to be a part of it..