

GUEST
COLUMN

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TELEMEDICINE WILL
HELP BRIDGE HEALTHCARE
DELIVERY GAPS IN INDIA

With the Covid-19 outbreak and the ensuing lockdowns making it difficult for patients to avail inpatient care, the Medical Council of India (MCI) along with Ministry of Health and Family Welfare (MoHFW) issued Telemedicine Practice Guidelines on 25 March, enabling registered practitioners to provide healthcare via telemedicine. Providing additional relief to insured patients, the IRDAI directed both health and general insurers to include telemedicine in policy claim settlements.

The much-needed statutory support comes in the wake of a practical understanding as we move towards a "new normal" in almost every other aspect of our lives, we have to accept that telemedicine is going to become an integral part of our

healthcare system. Healthcare facilities, doctors and patients should embrace it just the way they have embraced other convenient digital developments including WhatsApp, Zoom Calls, and Cashless Payment Options.

Some of the benefits of telemedicine are



- **Accessible medical aid:** Distance and long travel times often limit access to quality healthcare. Telemedicine can help overcome geographic healthcare barriers, particularly for specialised providers. It is a great help for patients living in remote and underserved communities and areas with a shortage of qualified clinicians.
- **Improved quality of care:** It can improve the quality of medical care for patients with both physical and mental health problems. It can help bring down the rate of hospital admissions and re-admissions. Patients will stay more actively engaged in their healthcare.
- **Lower healthcare cost:** It can improve the efficiency of healthcare delivery, reduce the caring and transportation expenses of patients and even help keep them out of the hospital. In most cases, it is cheaper than inpatient care.
- **Augment traditional medicine:** Telemedicine can help support traditional healthcare delivery models and improve the doctor-patient relationship. It allows care providers the flexibility and convenience of seeing their patients remotely for check-ups, follow-ups and educate them when necessary.
- **Ease of appointment with doctor's choice:** Through telemedicine patients can consult specialist doctors of their choice, irrespective of location.

From a purely technological point of view, it is crucial to be careful with app selection and go for authentic ones. Most patients living in urban regions use certain medical instruments these days. If they are attached to a mobile app, the readings can be sent to a physician directly, who can advise on the best course of treatment. Several apps come with attached diagnostic centres. The reports are shared with the doctor directly leading to timely advice.

Most telemedicine systems use smartphones to keep track of changing health parameters. Smartphone-based logs are an elaborate and convenient way of providing immediate help to patients. If electronic health records are linked to the Aadhaar card, then it can be used to create patient registries for big data analytics. It will allow physicians to track the health status of their patients, perform better predictive analytics and improve health outcomes.

With the recent Central government push, telemedicine is on its way to becoming the norm. The govt should also consider using the vast spread of government medical colleges, district hospitals, sub-divisional hospitals, CHCs and PHCs to implement a large-scale telemedicine network. States should be encouraged to go for public-private partnerships to establish a telemedicine network in government healthcare facilities.

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