ISSN 2320-9984

Volume 5 Issue 1 | March 2017 ISSN: 2320-9984 (Online)

International Journal of Modern Engineering & Management Research

Website: www.ijmemr.org

Telemedicine Approaches: Evolution, Applications, Technologies and Challenges

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Abstract*—-Telemedicine represents the delivery of healthcare services across geographical distances through telecommunications and information and communication technologies (ICTs). Although the concept has roots in early communication technologies, modern telemedicine developed substantially during the second half of the twentieth century and expanded rapidly with the emergence of digital networks, the Internet, mobile communication, videoconferencing and remote monitoring. Telemedicine had evolved from relatively small experimental projects into a clinically useful approach supporting diagnosis, consultation, disease monitoring, emergency care, education and specialist referral. Major approaches included synchronous or real-time telemedicine, asynchronous or store-and-forward services, remote patient monitoring, mobile health-based services and hybrid models combining several technologies. Telemedicine was particularly valuable for rural and underserved populations, where geographical barriers and shortages of specialists limited access to healthcare. Important applications include teleradiology, teledermatology, telepathology, telepsychiatry, telecardiology, teleophthalmology, tele-emergency care and chronic disease management. In India, initiatives involving the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO), Apollo Telemedicine Networking Foundation and government agencies demonstrated the potential of satellite-based and network-enabled healthcare delivery. Nevertheless, technical limitations, infrastructure requirements, professional acceptance, reimbursement, legal and ethical issues, privacy, data security and quality assurance remained important barriers. This article reviews the principal telemedicine approaches, their evolution, applications, advantages and limitations.*

Keywords:— *Telemedicine, Telehealth, Teleconsultation, store-and-forward, synchronous Telemedicine, remote patient monitoring, m-health, Teleradiology, digital health, ICT.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Healthcare delivery traditionally depends on direct interaction between patients and healthcare professionals. However, geographical distance, shortage of specialists, transportation difficulties, economic limitations and unequal distribution of healthcare resources can prevent patients from receiving timely medical care. Telemedicine emerged as an important approach for overcoming these barriers by using telecommunications and ICT to deliver healthcare when the patient and healthcare professional are physically separated [1,2].

The World Health Organization (WHO) has described telemedicine as an approach in which healthcare professionals use information and communication technologies to exchange information for diagnosis, treatment and prevention of disease and injuries, research and evaluation, and continuing education, where distance is a critical factor [3]. Thus, telemedicine is not simply a substitute for conventional consultation; rather, it represents a method of reorganising healthcare delivery around connectivity and information exchange.

By 2016, the field had expanded considerably. Telemedicine services were being used across primary, secondary and tertiary healthcare settings and in specialties ranging from radiology and dermatology to psychiatry, cardiology, ophthalmology and emergency medicine. There has been increasing interest in both synchronous and asynchronous systems, as well as mobile and home-based applications [4, 5].

2. HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF TELEMEDICINE

The fundamental idea behind telemedicine is older than modern computers and the Internet. Communication technologies have historically been used to transmit health-related information over distance. Telephone communication enabled healthcare professionals to exchange clinical information, while radio communication subsequently became useful in remote and maritime settings.

One of the frequently cited milestones in modern telemedicine occurred during the late 1950s, when psychiatric services were provided through closed-circuit television between geographically separated locations. This demonstrated that telecommunications could facilitate clinical interaction without physical co-location [4].

During the 1960s and 1970s, government agencies, universities and space programmes stimulated the development of remote medical technologies. NASA's work on monitoring astronauts contributed significantly to the development of physiological monitoring and remote healthcare technologies. During the 1980s and 1990s, satellite communication, digital imaging, personal computers and telecommunications networks created new possibilities for remote consultation and diagnostic services.

The rapid development of the Internet during the 1990s transformed telemedicine. Digital images, clinical records and other medical information could increasingly be transmitted electronically. The availability of broadband Internet and improved videoconferencing systems subsequently enabled more interactive services.

The development of telemedicine in India also followed this technological evolution. Apollo Telemedicine Networking Foundation developed an important early telemedicine network, with a VSAT-enabled village hospital commissioned in March 2000. Successful early projects contributed to the subsequent involvement of ISRO in telemedicine development [6]. ISRO initiated a Telemedicine Pilot Project in 2001 linking Apollo Hospital in Chennai with a rural hospital at Aragonda in Andhra Pradesh [7].

By the middle of the 2010s, telemedicine had therefore progressed from technology demonstration projects to increasingly diverse clinical and public-health applications.

3. CONCEPT AND SCOPE OF TELEMEDICINE

Telemedicine can be understood as the use of electronic communication and information technologies to facilitate healthcare delivery across distance. Its scope includes communication between:

- Patient and healthcare professional
- Primary-care and specialist physicians
- Hospitals and rural health centres
- Healthcare professionals and diagnostic laboratories

- Patients and monitoring centres
- Teachers and healthcare students
- Healthcare institutions and public-health authorities

The broader term **telehealth** generally encompasses clinical as well as non-clinical activities, including professional education, administrative services and public-health functions. **Telemedicine**, in contrast, has traditionally been used more specifically for clinical services.

The classification of telemedicine became increasingly important as the number of applications expanded. Bashshur et al. proposed a taxonomy to provide conceptual clarity among telemedicine, telehealth, e-health and mobile health (m-health) [8].

4. MAJOR TELEMEDICINE APPROACHES

4.1 Synchronous or Real-Time Telemedicine

Synchronous telemedicine involves simultaneous interaction between the patient and healthcare professional or between two healthcare professionals. Communication takes place in real time, usually through videoconferencing, telephone or other interactive technologies [4, 5].

Major components

- Two-way videoconferencing
- Telephone consultation
- Internet-based audiovisual communication
- Teleconsultation using peripheral diagnostic devices
- Remote specialist consultation
- Tele-emergency services

The major advantage of synchronous telemedicine is immediate interaction. Healthcare professionals can ask questions, obtain additional information and modify the consultation according to the patient's responses.

Applications

Synchronous telemedicine was used in:

- Telepsychiatry
- Tele-emergency medicine
- Tele-neurology
- Telecardiology
- Telepaediatrics
- Teledermatology
- Tele-intensive care
- Tele-stroke services
- Specialist consultation

Videoconferencing was particularly valuable where local healthcare facilities lacked specialists. The remote specialist could communicate directly with the patient or local healthcare worker and provide clinical advice.

4.2 Asynchronous or Store-and-Forward Telemedicine

Asynchronous telemedicine does not require the patient and healthcare professional to communicate simultaneously. Clinical information is collected, stored and subsequently transmitted to another healthcare professional for review [4, 5].

Typical information includes:

- Digital photographs
- Radiological images
- Histopathological images
- Clinical records
- Laboratory reports
- ECG recordings
- Dermatological images
- Wound photographs

The specialist reviews the information at a convenient time and sends a report or recommendation.

Advantages

Store-and-forward telemedicine is particularly useful in areas where continuous broadband connectivity is unavailable. It also allows specialists to review large numbers of cases without requiring simultaneous appointments.

Applications

Important applications included are -

***Teleradiology*:** Transmission of radiological images for remote interpretation.

Teledermatology: Transmission of photographs and clinical information relating to skin disorders.

Telepathology: Digital transmission of pathological images for specialist assessment.

Teleophthalmology: Remote assessment of ophthalmic images, particularly retinal images.

The WHO's global survey identified teleradiology, teledermatology, telepathology and telepsychology among major telemedicine fields being implemented internationally [3]. In the survey, teleradiology had the highest established-service rate among the reported telemedicine fields.

4.3 Remote Patient Monitoring

Remote patient monitoring involves collecting physiological or clinical information from patients at a distance and transmitting it to healthcare professionals or monitoring centres.

The monitoring technologies could be used for parameters such as:

- Blood pressure
- Blood glucose
- Heart rate
- Body weight
- Oxygen saturation
- ECG
- Respiratory parameters
- Activity and mobility

Remote monitoring was particularly important for patients with chronic diseases. Information collected at home could be transmitted periodically or continuously, allowing healthcare professionals to identify deterioration and intervene earlier involving the use of smartphones, wearable devices, biosensors and computerised remote-monitoring systems [9].

4.4 Mobile Health and Mobile Telemedicine

The rapid growth of mobile phones created another important telemedicine approach. **Mobile health (m-health)** refers broadly to the use of mobile devices and wireless communication technologies for health-related activities.

The mobile technologies were being explored for:

- Patient education
- Appointment reminders
- Medication reminders
- Health promotion
- Clinical communication
- Remote monitoring
- Disease surveillance
- Collection of patient-reported information
- Emergency communication
- Support for healthcare workers

Smartphones increasingly combined communication, computing, imaging and data-transfer capabilities, making them useful platforms for telemedicine.

4.5 Hybrid Telemedicine

The distinction between individual telemedicine approaches was becoming less rigid. A single healthcare service could combine real-time consultation, store-and-forward information and remote monitoring.

For example, a patient with diabetes might:

- Record blood glucose at home.
- Transmit the readings electronically.
- Upload relevant clinical information.
- Have the information reviewed by a healthcare professional.
- Participate in a video consultation.
- Receive modified treatment advice.

Such hybrid systems provided a more comprehensive approach to remote healthcare delivery.

5. MAJOR CLINICAL APPLICATIONS OF TELEMEDICINE

5.1 Teleradiology

Teleradiology was one of the most established telemedicine applications. Radiological images could be digitally transmitted from one location to another for interpretation by radiologists.

Its major advantages included:

- Access to specialist radiologists
- Faster interpretation
- Support for rural hospitals
- Night and emergency reporting
- Reduced need for physical transfer of films[10]

5.2 Teledermatology

Dermatology is particularly suitable for telemedicine because many skin disorders can be assessed visually. Digital photographs, clinical histories and patient information can be transmitted to a dermatologist.

Teledermatology could be performed using either:

- Real-time videoconferencing, or
- Store-and-forward digital images.
- It was particularly useful for rural and underserved populations.

5.3 Telepathology

Telepathology involves the remote examination of pathological specimens through digitised images. It can facilitate:

- Second opinions
- Specialist consultation
- Remote diagnosis
- Medical education
- Quality assurance

The development of digital imaging technologies and high-capacity networks strengthened the feasibility of telepathology.

5.4 Telepsychiatry

Mental healthcare became one of the important applications of synchronous telemedicine. Videoconferencing could provide psychiatric assessment and follow-up without requiring patients to travel to specialist centres.

The telemedicine interventions for a variety of mental disorders, supports the growing role of remote mental-health services [11].

5.5 Telecardiology

Telecardiology uses telecommunications for remote cardiovascular assessment and consultation. ECGs and other cardiac information can be transmitted to specialists.

Applications included:

- ECG interpretation
- Arrhythmia assessment
- Cardiovascular consultation
- Follow-up of cardiac patients
- Remote monitoring

Telecardiology was especially relevant to rural and emergency settings where immediate specialist access was limited.

5.6 Teleophthalmology

Digital retinal imaging enabled remote screening and assessment of ocular disorders. Teleophthalmology was particularly useful in screening programmes where specialist ophthalmologists were not readily available.

Potential applications included:

- Diabetic retinopathy screening
- Retinal disease assessment
- Glaucoma-related services
- Remote specialist consultation

5.7 Tele-emergency and Tele-intensive Care

Emergency medicine increasingly adopted telemedicine because specialist input can be time-critical.

Telemedicine supported:

- Stroke assessment
- Trauma consultation
- Emergency radiology
- Critical-care consultation
- Poison-management advice
- Paediatric emergency consultation

Tele-intensive care, often called tele-ICU, enabled specialists located away from the hospital to review patient data and assist local clinical teams.

5.8 Tele-rehabilitation

Tele-rehabilitation involved providing rehabilitation services through telecommunications technologies. The telemedicine applications have been explored in physical rehabilitation, neurological rehabilitation and home-based care.

Patients could receive:

- Exercise instructions
- Rehabilitation supervision
- Follow-up assessment
- Education
- Behavioural support

This approach had particular value for patients who experienced difficulty travelling to rehabilitation centres.

6. TELEMEDICINE IN PRIMARY HEALTHCARE

Telemedicine increasingly became relevant to primary healthcare because it could connect local healthcare providers with specialists.

A primary-care professional could transmit patient information to a specialist and receive diagnostic or therapeutic recommendations. This approach supported the principle of **hub-and-spoke healthcare**, in which a specialised centre serves multiple peripheral healthcare facilities.

Evidence has revealed that telemedicine interventions in primary care have potential contribution to clinical practice and healthcare delivery [12].

Telemedicine therefore had the potential to strengthen primary healthcare without requiring every rural facility to employ specialists.

7. TELEMEDICINE IN CHRONIC DISEASE MANAGEMENT

Chronic diseases require continuous monitoring rather than isolated clinical encounters. Telemedicine provided a mechanism for extending healthcare beyond the hospital or clinic.

Important target conditions included:

- Diabetes mellitus
- Hypertension
- Chronic heart failure
- Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease
- Asthma

- Cardiovascular disease

Patients could measure health parameters at home and transmit the results to healthcare professionals. Abnormal values could trigger clinical review.

Remote monitoring of chronic diseases was therefore one of the important developments in telemedicine. Reviews identified home-based monitoring and transmission of blood pressure, glucose and weight as established examples of this approach [4].

8. TELEMEDICINE FOR RURAL AND UNDERSERVED POPULATIONS

One of the strongest arguments for telemedicine has been its ability to reduce geographical barriers to healthcare.

Rural and remote populations frequently experience:

- Shortage of specialists
- Long travel distances
- Limited diagnostic facilities
- Transportation difficulties
- Delayed referral
- Higher indirect healthcare costs

Telemedicine can connect such communities to tertiary hospitals and specialist centres.

The WHO identified overcoming geographical barriers and improving access for rural and underserved populations as major potential benefits of telemedicine [3].

However, telemedicine itself depends on communication infrastructure. Consequently, areas with poor electricity, Internet connectivity or telecommunications infrastructure may experience difficulties in adopting telemedicine.

9. TELEMEDICINE DEVELOPMENT IN INDIA

India presented a particularly important environment for telemedicine because of its large population, substantial rural population and unequal distribution of specialist healthcare resources.

9.1 Apollo Telemedicine

Apollo played an important pioneering role in Indian telemedicine. The Apollo Telemedicine Networking Foundation developed a VSAT-based network, and the first VSAT-enabled village hospital was commissioned in 2000. Early proof-of-concept projects subsequently contributed to wider development of telemedicine in India [6].

9.2 ISRO and Satellite-Based Telemedicine

ISRO played a major role in establishing satellite-based telemedicine networks. Its Telemedicine Pilot Project began in 2001 and linked Chennai's Apollo Hospital with the rural Apollo Hospital at Aragonda in Andhra Pradesh [7].

Satellite communication was particularly valuable for connecting remote regions where terrestrial communication infrastructure was limited.

9.3 Government Initiatives

The Government of India also promoted telemedicine through several initiatives involving the Department of Information Technology, Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, ISRO and state governments.A National Telemedicine Task Force was established in 2005. Other initiatives included networks and projects relating to disease surveillance, cancer care, rural telemedicine, medical colleges and digital medical libraries [7].

10. TECHNOLOGIES SUPPORTING TELEMEDICINE

Telemedicine development was closely associated with advances in ICT.

Major technologies included:

1. Telephone networks: Provided basic voice-based consultation.

2. Videoconferencing: Enabled real-time interaction between patients and healthcare professionals.

3. Internet: Facilitated transmission of clinical information, images and electronic records.

4. Broadband: Improved the quality and reliability of audiovisual communication.

5. Satellite communication: Enabled connectivity in geographically isolated areas.

6. Digital imaging: Supported teleradiology, teledermatology, telepathology and teleophthalmology.

7. Mobile phones and smartphones: Supported m-health and mobile telemedicine.

8. Electronic health records: Provided digital access to patient information.

9. Remote sensors and monitoring devices: Allowed physiological information to be collected outside healthcare facilities.

The technological transition from analogue communication to digital, networked and mobile systems was one of the principal factors responsible for the expansion of telemedicine.

11. ADVANTAGES OF TELEMEDICINE

Improved accessibility: Patients living far from specialist centres could obtain specialist advice without extensive travel.

Reduction in geographical barriers: Telemedicine allowed healthcare expertise to cross geographical boundaries.

Specialist support : Rural and primary-care professionals could obtain advice from specialists.

Reduced travel and associated costs : Patients could avoid unnecessary travel, accommodation and related expenses.

Faster consultation : Real-time systems could facilitate rapid specialist consultation.

Continuity of care : Remote monitoring could support follow-up after hospital discharge.

Support for chronic disease management : Continuous or periodic monitoring could facilitate earlier identification of deterioration.

Education and professional development : *Telemedicine networks could also support continuing medical education, case discussions and training.*

Disaster and emergency response : Remote specialist expertise could be made available during disasters and emergencies.

12. LIMITATIONS AND CHALLENGES

Despite considerable development, telemedicine had not become a universal replacement for face-to-face healthcare.

12.1 Technological limitations

Poor connectivity, inadequate bandwidth, equipment failure and lack of technical support could interrupt services.

12.2 Infrastructure requirements

Reliable electricity, Internet connectivity, hardware and software were necessary for successful implementation.

12.3 Clinical limitations

Certain examinations and procedures require direct physical contact. Telemedicine may therefore be unsuitable when physical examination, laboratory testing or procedures are essential.

12.4 Data security and privacy

Transmission and storage of medical information raised concerns regarding:

- Confidentiality
- Authentication
- Data encryption
- Unauthorised access
- Patient consent
- Secure data storage

12.5 Legal and regulatory issues

Questions relating to professional licensing, liability, jurisdiction and standards of care were significant barriers to wider adoption.

12.6 Reimbursement

In many healthcare systems, uncertainty regarding reimbursement for remote consultations limited adoption.

12.7 Professional acceptance

Some healthcare professionals remained concerned about diagnostic accuracy, workload, technical reliability and changes to traditional clinical practice.

12.8 Digital divide

The populations that could benefit most from telemedicine were sometimes those with the least access to reliable telecommunications infrastructure.

13. QUALITY AND PATIENT SAFETY CONSIDERATIONS

Telemedicine must maintain standards comparable to conventional healthcare wherever clinically appropriate. Important quality considerations include:

- Accurate patient identification
- Adequate clinical history
- Appropriate image and audio quality
- Reliable diagnostic equipment
- Documentation of consultations
- Secure data transmission
- Informed patient consent
- Clear referral procedures
- Appropriate follow-up
- Defined professional responsibility

The quality of store-and-forward services, for example, depends strongly on the quality of images and clinical information transmitted. Image resolution, focus, lighting and acquisition technique can influence clinical interpretation [5].

14. FUTURE PERSPECTIVE ENVISAGED

The futuristictrendsin telemedicine development include-

- Wider availability of broadband Internet.
- Increasing smartphone penetration.
- Development of wearable health-monitoring devices.
- Greater integration with electronic health records.
- Cloud-based storage and clinical information exchange.
- Development of home-based monitoring systems.
- Greater integration of m-health and telemedicine.
- Expansion of remote specialist networks.
- Increasing use in chronic disease management.
- Development of evidence-based telemedicine guidelines.
- Greater attention to privacy and cybersecurity.
- Integration of telemedicine into routine healthcare systems.

15. CONCLUSION

Telemedicine had undergone substantial transformation. From early experiments involving telephone, radio and closed-circuit television to sophisticated Internet-based videoconferencing, digital imaging, satellite communication, mobile applications and remote monitoring, telemedicine had become an important component of modern healthcare delivery.

The principal approaches included **synchronous or real-time** telemedicine**, asynchronous or store-and-forward telemedicine, remote patient monitoring, mobile health and hybrid systems**. These approaches supported a broad range of clinical applications, particularly teleradiology, teledermatology, telepathology, telepsychiatry, telecardiology, teleophthalmology, emergency medicine and chronic disease management.

Telemedicine was particularly relevant to developing countries such as India, where geographical distance and uneven distribution of healthcare professionals created significant barriers to specialist care. The pioneering efforts of Apollo Telemedicine, ISRO and government agencies demonstrated how satellite and digital communication could connect remote communities with tertiary healthcare institutions.

Nevertheless, telemedicine remained complementary rather than universally substitutive to face-to-face healthcare. Infrastructure, clinical appropriateness, privacy, security, regulation, reimbursement, professional acceptance and quality assurance remained important challenges.

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