



European Medical Students' Association

Association Européenne des Étudiants en Médecine

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Lessons learnt from COVID-19: Managing Chronic Diseases through Telehealth

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The European Medical Students' Association (EMSA) represents medical students across Europe. We envision a healthy and solidary Europe in which medical students actively promote health. EMSA empowers medical students to advocate health in all policies, excellence in medical research, interprofessional healthcare education and the protection of human rights across Europe.

Problem Statement

Demographic trends indicate a rapidly aging population. Eurostat predicts that those aged 65 years or more may represent 28.5 % of the total EU population by 2050.[1] This demographic trend is accompanied by a growing prevalence of chronic diseases, particularly noncommunicable diseases.[2] These diseases are the leading cause of mortality and morbidity in Europe and represent considerable expenditure for health systems.[3] Some of these costs result from poorly optimized processes and health policies. For example, it is estimated that potentially avoidable hospital admissions for chronic conditions consume over 37 million bed days each year across the EU.[4] This phenomenon could be averted through better prevention and management of chronic conditions outside the hospitals, with significant savings for health systems.

Our View. Aim.

In view of the above concerns, EMSA issued a policy paper in 2018 highlighting the importance of primary health care for European health systems. Despite the efforts being made by most member states by recognizing the importance of primary health care in the proper management of chronic diseases, additional strategies should be explored in order to build more sustainable and resilient health systems.

Recently, the COVID-19 pandemic has put enormous pressure on many European countries, conditioning the availability of resources and limiting the access to health care. In a short time, telehealth has undergone a considerable expansion and demonstrated that a significant number of outpatients in various settings can be clinically managed effectively from a distance and that it is possible to allocate health system resources more efficiently. Many COVID-19 patients were screened and monitored remotely, while those not infected with the SARS-CoV-2, especially those at greater risk of a poor outcome if infected, had access to routine care through telehealth tools.[5]

Telehealth is not a recent innovation, nor is the idea of using it to manage chronic diseases. In fact, it was part of the vision presented in the European Commission's eHealth Action Plan 2012-2020 and there is a substantial amount of evidence that supports its use for remote patient monitoring and counseling for chronic conditions.[6,7] Despite this, over the last few years telehealth has encountered several obstacles to its large-scale adoption, such as the lack of a regulatory framework, IT infrastructures, patient trust and trained health professionals. EMSA believes that the COVID-19 pandemic creates a good opportunity to address some of these issues, contributing to flatten the curve of chronic diseases and help to shape more resilient health systems.

Recommendations

EMSA commits itself to:

- Continue to raise awareness among its members to eHealth topics;

- Contact important stakeholders and share our view on the importance of telehealth in the management of chronic diseases;
- Advocate for the implementation of telehealth programs through the action of its members at the local level.

EMSA calls upon the European Institutions and Member States to:

- Build upon the political momentum created by the COVID-19 pandemic in order to prepare health system reforms and to address, in a coordinated manner, barriers that have hindered the large-scale implementation of telehealth tools and programs;
- Build patient trust in telehealth programs through the dissemination of concrete data on the potential benefits of these tools and through policies that encourage and facilitate their implementation.

EMSA calls upon the European Commission to:

- Update the European Action Plan on eHealth, encouraging the implementation of telehealth programs aimed at monitoring and managing chronic diseases;
- Support Member States by developing a roadmap with guidelines for the deployment and use of telehealth tools;
- Monitor and report on different strategies and policies for implementing telehealth programs, both at EU and national levels;
- Report on health and socio-economic benefits of telehealth tools, building on knowledge accumulated at EU and national levels.

EMSA calls upon Member States to:

- Analyze and address any regulatory obstacles that hinder the national implementation of telehealth programs as valuable complementary tools in healthcare;
- Provide an IT infrastructure that supports the use of telehealth by health professionals and that facilitates citizens' access to these services;
- Design, implement and finance initiatives aimed at enabling the deployment and use of telehealth tools;
- Create financial incentives for the implementation of telehealth programs focused on the management of chronic diseases;
- Develop reimbursement models for eHealth tools showing evidence of health and socio-economic benefits;
- Collaborate with other Member States in resolving legal constraints for the safe exchange of medical information across national borders, taking into account the need to protect patient data;
- Collaborate with other Member States to develop interoperable eHealth services within and between national health systems.

EMSA calls upon Faculties of Medicine and Health Science to

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- Assess training needs in eHealth;
- Ensure adequate training in eHealth for medical students and health professionals, both in pre-graduate and post-graduate training programs;
- Encourage clinical research on the use of telehealth for monitoring and managing chronic diseases.

EMSA calls upon Healthcare Professionals to

- Build patient trust in telehealth programs, ensuring high quality care and high standards of patient safety, data protection and privacy;
- Conduct research on the impact of telehealth services and tools on chronic diseases;
- Work together with stakeholders, in particular patients and the IT industry, to ensure that telehealth tools and services are well adapted to clinical needs.

EMSA calls upon Medical Students to

- Understand its role in shaping future health systems and actively engage in the discussion of eHealth topics;
- Identify training gaps at the local level and seek solutions or complementary training;
- Be involved in research on eHealth tools.

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