

Telemedicine has the potential to revolutionise the UAE's healthcare sector

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Over the past decade, the Emirates have become a booming tourist destination. Dubai International Airport is now officially the world's busiest airport, welcoming over 70 million passengers in 2014. Many of these passengers come to the UAE for medical treatment, or require treatment while visiting the Emirates. This pressure on the industry will only increase over time as Dubai seeks to actively attract 500,000 medical tourists per year by 2020, according to the Government's medical tourism strategy announced last year. This would allow the Emirate to equal medical tourism destinations such as the US and Singapore. To help accommodate this influx, the Dubai Health Strategy 2013 – 2025 aims to build three new major hospitals, add forty new healthcare centres, and host fifty international medical conferences, but the strain on the healthcare sector will still be significant, especially in rural areas of the UAE.

Telemedicine, the use of digital technologies to provide healthcare services from a remote location, could be a solution for the increasing demand being placed on the healthcare sector. By expanding the reach of UAE physicians, telemedicine would help relieve the shortage of quality healthcare practitioners, as well as reduce costs and give patients greater access to general and specialist care through a variety of digital mediums.

Imagine if an elderly woman, in a remote part of the UAE, could access her qualified specialist physician located in Dubai, through video conferencing from her mobile phone, avoiding the excessive travel time and cost which might otherwise have been a deterrent to her seeking proper medical treatment prior to an emergency situation. Or, consider a pregnant woman's emergency delivery at a hospital not equipped to handle her birth complications, but which uses video conferencing and medical imaging sharing software to communicate with a specialist hospital to assist in the successful delivery of the infant.

Increasing advances in technology and the availability of 4G mobile networks has resulted in growing global channels for telemedicine to be utilised, therefore widening the patient groups that could benefit from it. Yet, in the UAE, telemedicine is still very much in its infancy.

The Abu Dhabi Health Authority currently has regulations setting minimum standards for telemedicine. However, the Dubai Health Authority only addresses teleradiology, not telemedicine, in their regulatory standards. Across the entire UAE, information security and medical liability remain a real and perceived barrier to complete adoption and integration of telemedicine.

An entire generation of computer savvy criminals have turned hacking electronic data into a highly lucrative pursuit. As a result, information security of healthcare data has emerged as one of the biggest concerns in digital health. Additionally, medical liability of doctors working across borders through digital health tools are concerns of both providers and patients. Yet, none of these legal issues are insurmountable.

Although the UAE has no consolidated information security law, there are elements of legislation at the federal level, and a few more specific laws in Dubai and Abu Dhabi, which generally govern data standards and information security in the UAE. Last year, Abu Dhabi established a Data Standards Panel of governmental and industry representatives tasked with reviewing and recommending changes to electronic data exchange standards. This progression shows promise for the ongoing development of more robust standards and guidance on information security and data protection in the UAE.

Telemedicine medical liability issues can be complex, impacting both the patient's rights and protections, as well as the physician's. For example, if a patient located in X country is misdiagnosed by a physician using telemedicine out of Y country, how does the patient file a medical liability claim against the foreign provider. The courts in X jurisdiction would not have the authority to impose penalties against the foreign provider. In Abu Dhabi, for clinical and medical services provided through telemedicine, the regulations place liability on the originating locally licensed healthcare facility. However, untested grey areas still exist across the Emirates. Legal risk exposure can be reduced by proper development and implementation of facility telemedicine policies and guidelines, including continual training and licensing requirements, and proactive monitoring of staff performance.

Advances in telemedicine and digital health in the region will be determined by regulators developing efficient policies, enabling appropriate data protection and information security laws, and ensuring that the legal and regulatory constraints do not impede innovation. Collaboration between regulators, the private sector, and healthcare professionals is key to the proper implementation of telemedicine, improving healthcare for citizens in the UAE, and reducing the increasing strain on the industry.

Particularly in this 'Year of Innovation', the UAE should champion innovative technology through enabling regulations and well targeted campaigns to raise awareness about digital health technologies, particularly telemedicine, and the ways this technology could increase and bridge the gap in access to healthcare services across the UAE.

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