

Accelerating Capacity of Telehealth in Afghanistan – Promoting Inclusive Health Services in Fragile IsDB Member Countries,

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Abstract

Deploying an innovative telehealth model in Afghanistan through the Bank's support for the Establishment of Telehealth Education and Clinical Support Facilities Project, has successfully contributed to developing the capacity of existing Afghan doctors and to perform teleconsultations. The project has resulted in the setting up of 6 online medical education and telehealth facilities in six provincial teaching hospitals across the country and provided training to at least 1,500 healthcare providers on the use of telehealth technology to deliver clinical services. The project is expected to benefit at least 50,000 Afghani patients annually through online consultations and 2nd opinion referral services. The project addresses key challenges in deploying telehealth solutions in a fragile environment where the internet bandwidth is poor. It also addresses the shortage of medical personnel by strengthening the capacity of out-of-practice medical practitioners especially female doctors to serve communities in remote areas that have few or no doctors.

Transforming Healthcare in Afghanistan:

In the heart of Afghanistan's challenging terrain, a revolution in healthcare delivery began in April 2022, through a collaboration between EDUCAST, a global online training and health technology service provider from Pakistan, and the Islamic Development Bank (IsDB). This partnership established Telehealth Education and Clinical Support Facilities across Afghanistan, targeting major cities including Kabul, Mazar, Zabul, Kandahar, Khost, and Jalalabad.

Engaging Out-of Practice Female Doctors

The IsDB recognized the critical need for enhancing healthcare accessibility in Afghanistan and provided a grant amounting to USD 180,000 to deploy an affordable easy-to-use Telehealth Technological Solution developed with our partner Educast, Pakistan that works in fragile, conflict and low-income settings (eCAST). The innovative solution eCAST deploys an innovative approach to leveraging Telehealth Technologies to Create Opportunities for Female Doctors to Earn and Serve. This funding was pivotal in setting up six fully equipped telehealth centers, aimed at revolutionizing the medical capacity of up to 1,500 Afghan doctors. The initiative sought to mitigate the healthcare professional shortage exacerbated by limited facilities and conservative norms, particularly impacting female practitioners and patients by digitally re-engaging out-of-practice female doctors through online education/certification in Family Medicine and other medical disciplines to address the gap in healthcare profession.

Continuous Medical Education to Enhance Quality of Medical Services

Afghanistan has a severe shortage of healthcare workers, especially in rural areas. This makes it difficult for people to access quality healthcare, especially for chronic diseases and other conditions that require regular monitoring and treatment.

In addition, the current practicing doctors lack updated and Continuous Medical Education (CME) training in their relevant fields, which is widening the gap in the quality of service offered. Establishing telemedicine and e-health as a national platform has been suggested to improve overall healthcare service delivery.

Educast formed an academic partnership with a major medical university in Sindh Province, Dow University of Health Sciences, and Germany's Major Medical Education platform Lecturio. Through this partnership, Educast began providing online refresher medical education to Afghan doctors. These trained and certified doctors will then be onboarded on the network to provide telehealth services. The telehealth system is low cost as it leverages in-country healthcare provider capacities for the provision of remote medical and non-medical services (e.g. patient and professional health-related education, digital health surveillance, and medical records management, training, and collaboration among healthcare providers and workers) including online specialist advisory services using innovative diagnostic tools and contemporary applications.

Using Broadband Aggregators to Ensure Smooth and Reliable Internet Connection

Internet connectivity is available even in fragile areas but they are often not reliable or fast enough. Internet Aggregators are used to overcome the limited internet connections by operators, these aggregators use the connectivity of all available operators in the area and bond them to aggregate acceptable high-speed links for seamless video live connection between patients and overseas doctors. In addition, instead of relying on proprietary systems, the best affordable and reliable telecommunication systems such as Google Meet or Zoom are used.

Providing Simple-To-Use Medical Diagnostics

Each telehealth center has a complete set of medical diagnostics that are used to provide much-needed information to the doctor who is being consulted remotely. The diagnostic equipment found in the “clinic in a box” has been customized for telehealth purposes. The Dermatoscope, Iriscope and Oscopes have embedded cameras that provide live feeds to enable the doctor to conduct a proper diagnosis.

Second Opinion Consultation Services for Doctors

Afghan doctors who come across complicated cases are able to speak and discuss these cases with specialist doctors to obtain a second opinion. The network of doctors created by Educast has enabled doctors to help one another and provide support when needed.

Developing a Network of Afghan Doctors Residing Locally and Overseas

Telehealth enables doctors to provide essential medical services wherever they may reside. In the event of conflict, some doctors may choose to leave the country as they are among those with the means to do so. However, if given the opportunity, they will be willing to provide medical services to their people remotely. While initially relying on the network of Pakistani doctors, Afghan doctors in the diaspora are also joining the network.

Policy recommendations / conclusions

Telehealth services are an essential means to provide tele-consultation services, remote diagnosis and real time monitoring. People living in remote areas who used to travel far distances just to visit a doctor spending a lot of money, time and pain are now able to consult a doctor through telehealth services. Telehealth is also able to efficiently link the demand from patients with the unutilized supply of doctors that are not able to practice full time. The project has shown that is possible to do so in such a challenging fragile country and there is potential to further expand and replicate the model in other countries.

Acknowledgments

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References

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