

## Telemedicine in the Arctic: communication challenges

### Telemedicina en el Ártico: desafíos en comunicación

Remote healthcare services and technology are quickly becoming commonplace for healthcare organizations across the globe and it's urgent to deepen on this topic. Answering this need, on the 5th of June 2015, the International Arctic Circle Conference on Healthcare Technology Assessment (IACCHTA) took place in Bodø (Norway) under the theme "Sustainability of Healthcare Services across Telemedicine". The Conference was organised by the University of Tromsø and Nordland Hospital, with the active collaboration of the University Carlos III of Madrid and the Spanish Association of Health Communication. The Conference was co-funded by the NILS Science & Sustainability Research Programme launched by the European Economic Area Financial Mechanism, Biotronik and Nordland Hospital. Programme and speakers can be seen in the Conference site at [www.aecs.es/iacchta.htm](http://www.aecs.es/iacchta.htm)

Presentations included topics such as cost-effectiveness and economic assessments in telemedicine (The PONIENTE and NORDLAND studies), patients' satisfaction and clinicians' experiences, quality of life as well as future trends in telemedicine. The presentations showcased the remote tele-monitoring of implantable cardiac devices as an example of innovative and cost-effective healthcare services.

IACCHTA revealed how digital revolution is profoundly changing clinicians and patients relationships and the ways in which healthcare is delivered. Actually, current telemedicine has moved beyond the telephone and email, videoconferencing and web portals, and now it includes a growing variety of advanced technologies and services using two-way video, smartphones, wireless tools, implantable devices and additional forms of telecommunication technologies.

While telemedicine offers benefits for individual patients and it is viewed by some governments as a way to improve access to care and control healthcare system costs, it is not applied in many regions of the world. During the Conference, experts showed how telemedicine is being integrated as a new service in some departments, by giving patients the freedom to choose either telemedicine or traditional care. IACCHTA speakers remarked that, in the short term, telemedicine won't be an option to choose but the only option to follow.

From the economic perspective, the budgets with more savings due to telemedicine services are "personnel and transportation costs" as a result of the decrease number of visits to the healthcare facilities. This is especially relevant in geographically dispersed areas such as the Arctic.

Moreover, informal costs are also significantly reduced, being a relief for patients and their relatives when coping with difficult health conditions.

Another relevant issues discussed during the Conference were *privacy* and *confidentiality*. They were considered key requirements in the development of future telemedicine technologies and services. Telemedicine clinicians have the same responsibility to protect patients' medical records and keep information regarding their treatments confidential. Therefore new systems should take this into consideration.

Another interesting aspect presented during IACCHTA was how telemedicine technology is recycled after the user does not need it anymore. Healthcare centers should develop standard procedures not only for the delivery but also the collection of telemedicine devices with strong focus on recycling.

Even still, the body of evidence supporting remote medicine and its outcomes continues to grow. Hard data continues to mount in favor of remote healthcare. In the Conference, two recent studies were presented and supported telemedicine as a way to improve healthcare services by reducing costs and increasing quality of life of patients and caregivers (the PONIENTE and NORDLAND studies). The immense cost savings cannot be ignored, nothing else has worked to reduce healthcare expenses.

The improved communication between clinicians and patients will inevitably make remote medical services and telemedicine technologies an integral part of many healthcare organizations. And regardless of some hurdles, it's clear that telemedicine is here to stay and bound to only become more popular. And while there is a long way to go before we're all able to have 24/7 medical help at the touch of our fingers, scientific meetings such as IACCHTA contribute to the development of this exciting field and the future of healthcare services.

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