



EMAIL
info@percept.co.za

147 Main Road, Rondebosch, 7700
Percept Actuaries and Consultants (Pty) Ltd 2017/466398/07
Directors: S. Ranchod, D. Strugnelli

www.percept.co.za/innovation

GREATER FLEXIBILITY IN THE TELEMEDICINE SECTOR IS NEEDED FROM HEALTH REGULATORS

9 December 2020 - Abridged Press Release

A research report released this week, by inter-disciplinary consultancy, Percept, has called on health regulators to retain the current, more flexible approach to telemedicine regulations that would provide a window of opportunity for research and data collection. Telemedicine refers to the delivery of healthcare services using information and communication technology, to connect a healthcare service provider with a patient where distance is a defining factor. "Telemedicine is not new in South Africa, but its uptake has been limited because of a number of reasons including government regulations, funding mechanisms, consumer adoption, and provider adoption," says Shivani Ranchod, CEO and healthcare actuary at Percept.

"The arrival of the pandemic has however seen the sector being given more flexibility by the country's health regulators. As a result, digital healthcare innovation in South Africa is flying high – it's something to be proud of. There's currently limited evidence for or against the impact and efficacy of telemedicine so now, while the regulations have been relaxed, is the perfect time for regulators to do further research as we have working case studies to look to." Through extensive interviews with telemedicine industry stakeholders, including funders, service providers and users, the Percept research analysis on how the pandemic and the changes in the South African telemedicine regulations have impacted the South African telemedicine market, offers a way forward, she adds.

"Telemedicine is not the way of the future: it is the way of the present, and it is one of few options available to allow our health system to do more with less. Now is the time to harness the potential of the telehealth technology and digital innovation in South Africa, and the momentum gained from COVID-19, with the ultimate goal of better and more efficient access to healthcare for the future," says Ranchod.

The pandemic created an urgent need for telemedicine services in South Africa that can simultaneously protect vulnerable patients as well as the healthcare providers that look after them. As a result, telemedicine guidelines have been temporarily relaxed by the Healthcare Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA).

"It's imperative that the industry be given the time and the regulatory space to develop so that more evidence on the impact of these models can be gathered to inform future regulatory decisions," says Ranchod. "For the regulator to revert back to previous regulations without sufficient research and evidence would set our digital health innovation back by years." Telemedicine has a supporting role it can play in the healthcare system and does not aim to replace healthcare workers. Instead, Ranchod explains, it can improve efficiencies and costs if it is properly integrated as part of the routine practice of medicine.

"We would like to see serious debate around telemedicine in SA, while the momentum and innovation is behind it. Other African countries such as Rwanda and Kenya are already using telemedicine to expand access to specialist care to rural areas and achieve universal health coverage, and we should be following their examples," says Ranchod.

Telemedicine has the potential to increase access to quality healthcare while reducing costs to patients and the health system, so it is important to integrate it, as part of the routine practice of medicine. This should be done through ensuring that existing regulations allow for the practice of direct-to-patient telemedicine, with or without a prior relationship with the healthcare practitioner. Telemedicine needs to form part of the training of healthcare professionals, which will in turn, improve the quality of virtual consultations.

"We would like to see serious debate around telemedicine in South Africa, while the momentum and innovation is behind it," says Ranchod. "Other African countries such as Rwanda and Kenya are already using telemedicine to expand access to specialist care to rural areas and achieve universal health coverage. We are very open to engaging with both the HPCSA and the National Department of Health – both of whom didn't engage prior to the publication of the report."

FOR MEDIA ENQUIRIES CONTACT:

Martin Slabbert
Tel +27 21 421 0430
Mobile +27795001503
E-mail martin@hwb.co.za



PERCEPT
HEALTH · SOLVE

No more waiting room +

Making the case for sustainable telemedicine in South Africa