


TELEMEDICINE AND INDIA-AFRICA HEALTH DIPLOMACY

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Abstract :

India and Africa have a long legacy of shared experiences through their history and the challenges that they face in the medical sector. The existence of telemedicine and its further development has made this cooperation and partnership between the two even more viable. This paper looks at the benefits that telemedicine has brought for the continent of Africa while also analyzing and studying the Pan African E-network project and how it has translated into better healthcare for African patients.

Keywords: *Telemedicine, health diplomacy, vaccine, doctors, Africa*

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Introduction :

Healthcare has always been one of the most basic needs of our modern age. With the advent of technology and increase in industrial activity there also came a change in the lifestyle of people. Therefore, today we have a part of the world which suffers from basic healthcare issues like malnutrition due to lack of resources and a different part of this same world which has diseases due to overuse of resources. Both these sections of people need access to medicine and doctors. However, this access is not always available and so people end up suffering through the disease or even worse, they die from it. This is where telemedicine comes into the picture.

The application of ICT to medicine and healthcare has opened doors for patients living in remote areas or in countries where the availability and quality of doctors is low or sub-standard. It is not a new thing and has slowly developed over the decades to reach the potential it provides today in the form of doctor consultations at the tap of a screen, or getting procedures done through assistance on call by better doctors among many other things. This became especially important for countries like India and Africa when the pandemic hit in 2020.

India-Africa partnership also goes a long way back to the time when both were colonized or recovering from the pain of decades of imperialist misadventures. This set a tone of cooperation and understanding in the way India approaches its diplomacy with African countries. In the past few years, India became an important partner for African countries in the domain of health, be it through medical tourism, export of drugs and vaccines or telemedicine services. This paper discusses these very things and throws light on how telemedicine services between India and African countries has helped African patients during the pandemic.



Research Design :

1. Aim: To understand the benefit of telemedicine on African patients and explore the ventures between India and Africa in the context of telemedicine.
2. Objectives:
 - (a) To understand the meaning and scope of telemedicine in general
 - (b) To study the initiatives around telemedicine between India and Africa
 - (c) To analyse the nature of India-Africa health diplomacy
 - (d) To explore how telemedicine has helped African patients so far
3. Methodology: Qualitative methodology is used in this paper. Analysis of various secondary sources like news articles and research papers has been done.
4. Limitation: The research limits itself to secondary sources due to the nature of the topic and confines itself to understanding the topic in context of India-Africa health diplomacy.

What is Telemedicine?

Due to the benefits that Telemedicine provides it has received a lot of attention from fields like not just medicine but also policymaking. Therefore, it is important to first understand the concept of telemedicine and what it essentially covers. As per a definition of the World Health Organization (WHO) telemedicine is the use of Information and communication technology by healthcare professionals for delivery of medical services wherever distance is an obstructing factor in access. It also says that telemedicine is being used when ICT is being used for exchange and sharing of information related to prevention or control of disease or for diagnosis of treatment or injury.

Telemedicine has proved the most useful in areas of research and development. During the current pandemic we saw a first-hand demonstration of this in vaccine development and delivery. However, telemedicine has been the little star of medical world since a long time. The first example of it being used is when ECG was transmitted through phone lines in early 20th century. Telemedicine has come to the rescue even during disaster management and that's why we see its widespread adoption by ISRO and the Government of India through its various plans and programs. The year 1996 saw the first Deployment of an 'Indigenously Developed Hospital Information System Software' by CDAC Noida at SGPGIMS, Lucknow, UP.

Since then India has moved on to evolving telemedicine not just for its own medical sector but also for its partner countries. In its cooperation with Africa, healthcare is a vital factor and telemedicine has come forward here as well. Let's look at the role this has played in health diplomacy of India and how it has resulted in benefits for the African patients seeking medical care from India.

Telemedicine and its role in India-Africa health cooperation :

The diplomatic relations between India and African countries has been interesting since the time we got independence. There was a deep cultural and emotional connection between the continent and India due to common bonding



factors such as colonialism, imperialism and the most important one - Mahatma Gandhi. This remained the important factor later on as well when African countries cooperated with India in its Non Alignment Movement. In the present, the foreign policy engagement of India with African countries has been increasing. India has turned out to be the third largest destination for exports and fifth largest amongst the investors on the continent. Its bilateral trade with the African countries has also increased from \$7.2 billion to \$63 billion between the years 2001 and 2017-18.

The project that stands tall amongst others is India's telemedicine project in Africa - the Pan African E- network launched by the Ministry of External Affairs in 2008. The basic objective of this project is to build capacity amongst the healthcare systems of African countries. It aimed to connect medical institutions of India with African countries and train students in medical education. Along with that, online consultation of expert doctors and medical practitioners was provided. The implementing agency for this project was a Public sector enterprise - Telecommunications Consultants India Limited (TCIL), under Ministry of IT.

The Pan African E-network Project has been operational since 2008 and the following hospitals were selected by MEA for this project:

1. AIIMS, New Delhi
2. Amrita Institute of Medical Sciences, Kochi
3. Apollo Hospitals, Chennai
4. CARE Hospital, Hyderabad
5. Escorts Heart Institute and Research Centre, New Delhi
6. Fortis Hospital, Noida
7. Healthcare Global Enterprises, Bangalore
8. Mool Chand Khairati Ram Hospital, New Delhi
9. Narayana Hrudayaylaya, Bangalore
10. Sri Ram Chandra Medical College and Research Institute, Chennai
11. Dr. Balabhai Nanavati Hospital, Mumbai
12. Sanjay Gandhi Post Graduate Institute of Medical Sciences, Lucknow

1. Benefits to African patients:

African countries, especially the ones with substandard medical care and lack of availability of required number of doctors have benefited from India's telemedicine program. For example in Ethiopia which is the second most populous country of sub-saharan Africa and the one with a vast rural community divided by wide geographical difficulties, the Network has proved very useful. Ethiopia has just one doctor for every 37,000 people which is very dangerous for patients seeking emergency care over there.

With the help of the Pan African E-network, a doctor in Ethiopia could get on a call with a doctor in India and consult over some medical difficulty. They could analyse X-ray charts and lab reports with just the click of a button. This enables the doctor to come up with the best possible diagnosis and mode of treatment for the



Africa patient. In a continent where doctors and nurses are overworked and underpaid, the services of India appear as a godsend. The villagers don't have to walk miles to get a basic consultation now as telemedicine centres can be developed at closer locations. The benefits that India provided through telemedicine also made it an attractive destination for medical tourism and this in turn has helped more African patients.

2. Benefits during Pandemic :

The pandemic turned out to be an inflection point for India's support to African Patients. Telemedicine allowed India to cooperate with Africa on vaccines and it could make them available to African countries on time thereby saving many lives. African countries already had a vulnerable healthcare system riddled with issues on a structural level. This got worse during the pandemic. However, India increased its engagement in these tough times and got even closer than before with countries in Africa.

The already built communication systems by India in the context of healthcare in Africa proved useful in its vaccine, medicine and health related equipment based support. The digital education and health programs conducted by India under its Pan African E-network project in the past five years stood the test of time and helped patients get a proper treatment during the chaos that was the first wave of COVID-19 pandemic.

Conclusion :

India and Africa had a shared bond already and this has gotten stronger with the kind of cooperation that was seen during the pandemic. The structural changes made by telemedicine in the medical industry of both India and the continent of Africa proved to be a disruptor in the way that things were being done. This created new possibilities for patients in both Africa and India. The road ahead for telemedicine in Africa is still riddled with obstacles as we need to work on various aspects such as bureaucratic hurdles and lack of internet connectivity at some places.

However, there is a lot of hope because telemedicine is something that shows great promise. It has the capacity to fill the void in healthcare that exists in Africa and India and therefore enable and empower the people of both places to have a better standard of life, which is the ultimate goal of any diplomatic or technological endeavor.

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