Technology set to change face of medical care

Radical changes born of necessity, such as telehealth, may become long-lasting fixtures

By Eunice Koh

More than for any other sector, COVID-19 has transformed the healthcare industry. National Healthcare Group (NHG) chief executive officer Wong Poh Bee said the implementation of remote video consultations was a key change made in response to the pandemic. Last year, it introduced four new telehealth offerings for all health services, including remote physiotherapy, dietetics, psychological services and tele-consultation care. It also began offering telehealth services to patients in the elderly. Patients who previously had to be transported to a clinic now receive a consultation online. Prof Poh said more than 11,000 telehealth consultations were conducted across NHG’s six poly- clinic sites last year.

"While the COVID-19 situation in Singapore has stabilised, NHG’s new telehealth services are the new norm of care, allowing patients who are in between clinic visits to continue receiving medical care in the safety and convenience of their homes," he said.

Similarly, both the National University Hospital (NUH) and Singapore General Hospital reported an increase in telehealth services and ramped up engagement in virtual consultations. "NHIC is currently working on the expansion of its telehealth services across all institutions within the healthcare cluster in order to offer this service to more patients," he said.

"In September this year, the Simpson study from the University of Sydney found that telehealth consultations and care delivery have increased significantly. More than 70 per cent of Australian patients said they were interested in continuing telehealth consultations and care delivery if the quality of the service was similar to that of an in-person consultation. The study also found that telehealth consultations and care delivery can be more effective and efficient than in-person care delivery. "We have now moved from a situation where telehealth was a supplement to in-person care delivery to one where telehealth is essential to the delivery of care," said Simpson.

"In addition to saving on transport time and costs, telehealth consultations have also been shown to improve patient satisfaction. In a study conducted by the American Telemedicine Association, 83 per cent of patients said they would recommend telehealth consultations to others. "This is a significant improvement over the previous year, where only 59 per cent of patients said they would recommend telehealth consultations to others," said Simpson.

"In conclusion, telehealth has become an integral part of the healthcare delivery model. We are confident that telehealth will continue to play a significant role in the delivery of healthcare in the future," said Simpson.

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