

## TELEMEDICINE FROM THE POINT OF VIEW OF CITIZENS

For several years, I have been an elected municipal official in a small town with 6500 inhabitants, located in a scarcely populated area of northern Finland. I know that the ageing population, modern expensive medical technology and an increasing demand for care are the principal reasons for the facts that health services have become jammed and waiting lists are getting longer. I also know that the gap between the resources available in our town and the need for care among the inhabitants is widening in an alarming manner. As representatives of the citizens, we on the municipal health board are very concerned with the situation

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However, we do possess some strategic tools to face up to these challenges. One of the most important of these is, to my mind, telemedicine. In the following, I will reflect both on my own opinions, and on those I have heard in discussions with my fellow citizens.

Our health centre was among the earliest pioneers of Finland in using telemedicine for the delivery of health services. We have used it since 1996 on a regular basis in video-conferencing with the University Hospital of Oulu, first in surgery and afterwards also in psychiatry. Distant education using the same video-conferencing equipment has also been implemented in the continuous professional education of the staff of our health centre for several years.

I believe that the most important benefit of telemedicine is the fact that the patient, the doctor and the nurse can communicate mutually and interactively, regardless of distances. In a scarcely populated country such as in Finland, this significantly improves access to specialized health-care services. The distance between the health centre of Pyhäjärvi and the University Hospital of Oulu is 160 km. A simple visit to and from the out-patient department of the hospital takes 8 – 10 hours for our inhabitants. It is a long time for a short appointment with a specialist for anybody, and especially for sick and old people. Using telemedicine, both time and travelling costs are saved. It not only concerns the patient, but often also her/his relatives. Many of the old patients need an escort for a visit to the hospital. Escorting is easily arranged for a short

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visit to one's own health centre for video-conferencing, but it may be difficult for a whole day visit to the hospital.

In our health-care system, there has been an operational electronic patient record system for several years. However, so far it has been impossible to use it for exchanging data with the university hospital, or with other health-care units. The reason for this is that we have, in Finland, several different kinds of information systems operating in our health-care organizations. This blocks the fluent transfer of information. It is, therefore, very important to achieve the integration of the information systems, so that we can offer seamless care for our patients. According to our National Project on Securing the Future of Health-care, this goal will be achieved in 2007, and I hope that it will actually happen. As our first step towards that goal, we are just now bringing an electronic hospital referral system into use.

Another aspect that needs to be developed is the use of telemedicine for education. Due to the long distances we face, participating in a professional education event for one day at the university hospital requires sitting in a car for four hours. This means wasting the working time of our doctors and nurses. Using telemedicine, we can educate our health centre staff effectively and in a time saving manner.

The fundamental idea of telemedicine is to transfer information instead of patients, doctors, or nurses. This helps to organize the delivery of services so that queues can be avoided and the working time and expertise of the health-care staff can be effectively exploited. We have assessed the feasibility and cost-effectiveness of our video-conferencing system and found it to be both practical and cost-saving.

As the chairman of our municipal health board, I have received positive feedback from the patients who have received treatment and care by means of telemedicine. The high level of patient satisfaction has encouraged us to try to increase the use of telemedicine to cover all specialities of medicine. In the future, citizens will take better care of their health, and their demands for care will increase, too. For these reasons, I believe that the importance of telemedicine is continually growing, because it has the potential to help us to deliver versatile services effectively, and in a timely manner, for all of those in need of them.

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